



**‘V.’**

An audio-visual installation by  
**Norbert Francis Attard**



THE PROFANE IN STRAIT STREET

# ‘V.’

An audio-visual installation by Norbert Francis Attard.

Public Convenience, Strait Street, Valletta, Malta, 2010.

Commissioned by Valletta Local Council.

Sponsored by Vodafone Malta Limited.

In collaboration with Chris Briffa Architects and S&S Bathrooms Ltd.

Audio-play written and directed by Narcy Calamatta.

Introduction by Professor Peter Serracino Inglott.

Curatorial text by Dr. Petra Bianchi.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Neon light manufactured by Neonglow Ltd.

Sign writing by Creative Works.

Project managed by Stephen Busuttil.

Performers of audio-play: Polly March, Anna Bassily, Keith Borg.

Sound effects and recording by Mario Sammut.

Additional editing by Kathleen Bitetti.









One of the main elements in Norbert Attard's installation is the letter V. It is made up of alphabetic components: a double inverted inscription of *I love Tracy Emin* in red neon light. The red is not only immediately evocative of red light districts such as the Gut was, but also of the idea propounded by the most eminent philosophers of colour from Goethe to Wittgenstein - that red is the colour *par excellence*. Neon lighting had become normal in the garish vulgarity of the last almost pathetically boisterous phase of Strait Street history. What the red neon stands for is the stuff out of which V is made.





Actually, Pynchon's novel opens with the focus on Paola, a barmaid from Strait Street, who had been married and taken away to the United States by an American sailor called Pappy Hod. (The episode is compared by Pynchon to Europa's rape by the bull in Greek mythology and reflects his concern with the global role of the USA). Paola, is now working in a New York bar, called The V Note, disguised as a Negress and known as Ruby. This altogether fake appearance contrasts totally with the simplicity and peace of heart that had characterized her Strait Street persona. Ironically, when the novel opens, Paola is with Benny Profane, described as a schlemihl, a Jewish expression denoting a rolling stone that gathers no moss. Paola tells him that she is separating from her husband, alleging cruelty on his part, exactly at the moment when he is afloat again on his ship, bound again for Malta. Profane's perpetually circular movements somehow always rotate around the enigmatic and elusive barmaid from Strait Street, who seems to embody the ideal of a person immune from the creeping materialism of the world which they inhabit. Paola persuades Profane to accompany her back to Malta, together with Herbert Stencil, the character in the book who is trying to identify what the letter V stood for. It had occurred in his father's diary as standing for the force that threatened his life. V could have stood for Valletta. At first Profane was reluctant "I have been there once. Why should I want to go back?" "But didn't Valletta – somehow – get to you? - Make you feel anything?" ("Stencil was scared to death of Valletta)". "But hadn't there been something about the bombed-out buildings, buff-coloured rubble, excitement of Kingsway? What had Paola called the island: a cradle of life." However, what Paola does when they come to Malta, is find her husband Pappy Hod and return with him to the United States.

I have chosen to relate just this little fragment of the very complicated plot of Pynchon's V because it relates to two of the main elements in Norbert Attard's installation. The first is the audio-script that Narcy Calamatta, my cousin, has written for it. This dialogue is set in 1963. This year happens to be the one before Malta became independent and a change in the fortunes of Strait Street was heralded. It is also the year in which Pynchon's novel was published and also the year of the birth of Tracey Emin, about whom more anon. This not-very obvious focussing on a particular date is yet another way of gently rubbing into our subconscious of the Pynchonite obsession with the question of design or absurdity or co-incidence in the unfolding of history.

One of the two voices belongs to a Maltese barmaid, the euphemism used for prostitute. She seems to me to have exactly the same type of character as Pynchon's Paola. Her dialogue in English with the English lady now working in a very different context as a pimp has many of the linguistic characteristics that Pynchon endows Paola's speech with in the context of the V Note bar in New York. Her desire to have a daughter in spite of her unfortunate experiences with previous children shows her to be a kindred spirit with Paola – "cradle of life". The dialogue begins with cries of pain that sound at first as if sex-related but it quickly results that her suffering is rather more due instead to naïve and quasi-noble love.



VACATION  
VACUUM  
VAGINA  
**VAIN**  
VALENTINO  
VALIUM  
VAGUE  
VALLETTA  
VALUE  
VANITY  
VAN GOGH  
VANISH  
VARIATION  
**V.A.T.**  
VATICAN  
VASECTOMY

VASELINE  
VEGETARIAN  
**V-DAY**  
VELOCITY  
VENEREAL DISEASE  
VENDETTA  
VENIAL SIN  
VENTURE  
**VENT**  
VENTILATION  
VENTRILOQUIST  
**VENUS**  
VERITAS  
VERNACULAR  
VERMOUTH  
**VERSUS**  
VELVET  
VERMILLION  
**VESSEL**

VESUVIUS  
VICTIM  
**V.I.P.**  
VICE VERSA  
VICIOUS CIRCLE  
**VICKY**  
VICTORY  
**VIDEO**  
**VINO**  
VIOLENCE  
VIOLIN  
VIRGIN  
VIRILE  
VIRGIN MARY  
VIRTUOSO  
VIRTUE

VIAGRA  
VIBRATION  
**VICE**  
VICINITY  
VICIOUS  
**VIPER**  
**VIRUS**  
VISCERAL  
VISION  
VISITATION  
VITAMIN  
V-SIGN  
**VIXEN**  
VOCABULARY  
VOCATION  
VOCIFERATE

VODKA  
**VOICE**  
**VOID**  
VOLUNTARY  
VOLATILE  
VOLCANO  
VOLUME  
VOLUPTUOUS  
VOLTAGE  
**VOMIT**  
VORACIOUS  
**VOTE**  
VOYAGE  
VOYEUR  
VULGAR  
**VULVA**



THE SACRED IN STRAIT STREET





The second is the inscription of the words: “I love Tracy Emin”. Let me note for a start that Emin spells Tracey with an e but confesses that she often misspells in her writing. She had a Turkish father, which may account for the Mediterranean look in some aspects of her character. Emin is now 47 and belongs to the group known as Britartists or YBA (Young British Artists) founded by Gilbert and George, the founders of the Toilet Gallery. She is perhaps most famous for having exhibited in 1999 in the Turner Prize Competition an installation called *My Bed* consisting of her own unmade dirty bed with used condoms and blood stained underwear. The attraction of her work seems to consist essentially in the combination of unabashed sexuality and a simple-hearted exhibition of her sufferings as for instance in the trauma left by abortion. She clearly has a character very similar to that which Pynchon attributes to Paola.

**A third element in Norbert Attard’s installation is words beginning with the letter V inscribed on the large aperture on the front of the Public Convenience. The list of these words evokes the mix of sacred and profane that characterizes Strait Street overall. Famously the street was the birthplace and the breeding place of one of the three Maltese persons proclaimed Blessed (meaning almost ready for Sainthood) by Pope John Paul II, Nazju Falzon by name. Images of our Lady of Sorrows with oil lamps or candles lit in front of them were well known regular features of the dwellings of the so-called barmaids of the Gut. In Attard’s list one finds vagina and Virgin Mary, as well as Vat followed by Vatican. The allusion to Pynchon is not just simply in the fact that the main storyline in the novel is the search for what the letter V stands for in the diary of a mysteriously disappeared character, but also because the novel is philosophically an inquiry into whether there is a patter in history or it all happens by chance. Pynchon’s problem is that too many different patterns emerge out of the study of history. In the haphazard sequence of words beginning with V in Attard’s installation, the order of which is determined only by the vagaries of the alphabet, whole sets of logical connections emerge as it were on their own stimulus as in the two examples quoted above, or V-SIGN/VIAGRA & VOMIT/VOYAGE.**

The letter V by itself evokes more singularly than any other word of which it is the initial just the word Victory. But in Norbert Attard's installation, it is fashioned of red neon lights. Passion including suffering are the components of the eventual triumph, just as the Cross is the condition of the Resurrection. Thus, the transformation of a place initially identified as a receptacle of filth and waste into a brilliant and beautiful work of art can be seen to have patently a social value and significance, but also latently a sacred if not quite sacramental meaning.

**Peter Serracino Inglott**



### **Peter Serracino Inglott**

Former rector of the University of Malta, he is Professor in the Department of Philosophy, University of Malta, since 1971 and a special advisor to the Prime Minister of Malta since 1998. He is Chairman of the Mediterranean Institute, Director of the International Ocean Institute and is Chairman of the International Institute of Baroque Studies. He is author of *Beginning Philosophy* (1987), *Peopled Silence* (1995) and *Mediterranean Music* (with Charles Camilleri) (1998) and has written numerous articles mainly in the border areas between philosophy and the human sciences. He is also the author of two libretti of operas, *The Maltese Cross* (1995) and *Compostella* (1993) and is a member of the editorial boards of several international journals including, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, *Arte Cristiana*, *Ethos* and *Kos*.







# V for Vague

A radio play by  
**Narcy Calamatta.**

Commissioned by Norbert Francis Attard.  
Directed by Narcy Calamatta.

Sailors having a happy time in the ‘Gut’.

Photo, courtesy of Jim Bryce

Place and Time

**A cubicle in a latrine in Strait Street Valetta.**  
**Mid-sixties - night**

Characters

**Vicky a young battle hardy Maltese prostitute.**  
**Tracy an ancient English battle axe pimp.**  
**Pawlu, Vicky’s pimp.**

Performers

**Polly March, Anna Bassily, Keith Borg.**

Sound effects and recording engineer

**Mario Sammut.**

**VICKY:**

(Suppressing a long moan and heavy breathing) Oooh! That hurts.  
Ah, ah, ah! .....ħaqq it hurts you ta(f).

**TRACY:**

(Coughing a chronic bile-boiler rhythm through clenched teeth.  
She snorts a male laugh).

**VICKY:**

(Again with the moaning and breathing) ħaqq you. No more, no more taf.

**TRACY:**

(Hoarse) Two more times and I’m ready.

**VICKY:**

Irraħ! You’re putting that inside me again strina? Le taf ħaqq ghax it hurts. Look at the blood. Aaaah! Insomma ejja quick, quick! Just in ‘n out, orright? (Moaning uncontrollably).

**TRACY:**

Quiet ducky or they will find us. The police will never guess we are hiding in a men’s toilet.

**VICKY:**

(Cries) It hurts, it hurts. You are so rough.

**TRACY:**

Thank you for nothing. Why did you send for me then?

**VICKY:**

Ĥeqq they told me Tracy Smith, I-ingliża, was a nurse in the army hux! True, you was a nurse?

**TRACY:**

Nurse? Not half love. I used to run a whole bleedin’ ward at the Bighi Naval Hospital. They only paid me as a cleaner, though, the bastards. The patients were ‘summit’ else. For them I was a surgeon, a mother, a sister, a lover and a confessor. Me and mine never went hungry during the war. All this doctor’s equipment, I saved during the air raid on HMS Illustrious. The hospital got a direct hit and the store rooms were set on fire. The chief surgeon told us if we were brave enough to go into the burning rooms whatever we salvage we can keep. I got a complete surgeons bag with all the instruments. I didn’t get more because there was a wounded nurse and I dragged her out safely. They promised me the Victoria Cross and all I got was the two fingers up yours sign. Anyway I kept this doctor’s bag since. You never know in our trade. I can do things a doctor wouldn’t dare... Keep your fingers tight on the stitches lovey, it’ll stop the blood.

**VICKY:**

(Crying and moaning) Aaaah! You think it will stop?

**DOLLY:**

If it don’t Vicky darlin’, you will be the first prostitute to die in a cubicle in the men’s latrine in Strait Street. Look what a mess. Talk of painting the town red. Har har har (laughs) Press, press! (We hear cloth ripping apart) Here meluv let me bandage you with this old towel.

**VICKY:**

Maaa! I’m so stupid. I believed them when they said Tracy I-ingliża is a nurse.

**TRACY:**

There’s a real doctor down the street. I’ll go get him for ...

**VICKY:**

Get ‘im? Get ‘im? Mela you are crazy.

**TRACY:**

(Laughs) Why are you so scared of doctors? They charge less than you do per stint. Here take this scarf, wipe the blood... Oh dear!

**VICKY:**

(In pain) Mmmmm! If a doctor sees this cut ... he will have to tell the police. Big knife, no joke!

**TRACY:**

That’s not a cut luvvy that’s a gash. I gave you five stitches and it is still gaping like a Cornish Pastiss. ...Never mind wiping the floor. Give it here...

**VICKY:**

My new leather skirt ... it is all blood.

**TRACY:**

Red skirt, red blood... suits you...here soak it in this .....

**VICKY:**

(Yells a suppressed scream) Aaaah! What’s it istra.....

**TRACY:**

Quiet or you will have the police in here in no time....here drink a bit of it .... It’s brandy....!

**VICKY:**

Brandy? It’s hot ħaqq, hot, hot, hot!





**TRACY:**

Yeah burns a bit donnit? Put some on the wound it kills everything..... ‘e are drink some more.... It’s a disinfectant and a form of anesthetic too..... Drink some.....Hey don’t finish it off. We need to clean that wound again soon. Let me see ... Mmmm... I don’t like the looks of it, love!

**VICKY:**

When my husband sees it he will kill me.

**TRACY:**

Have no fear you might die of an infection before he sees it, me dear Vee.

**VICKY:**

My Pawlu doesn’t like bites or scratches on my body. He says it’s bad for business aye? You think this will stay like that.

**TRACY:**

You will always have an ugly scar but you can tattoo something around it. ... Don’t move .... The blood is drying up ... what do you want with this husband of yours? Let me pimp for you. I will keep you for only one special Maltese businessman. You never know he might even marry you one day.

**VICKY:**

I’m already married. Besides my husband is a good pimp. He has no other girls, only me. He helps me with the family. He lets me keep all the money I make.

**TRACY:**

What money? Sailors’ money? That’s peanuts. A real Maltese gentleman will keep you like a queen even though he would still be living with his wife. I might even find you a noble one with blue blood.

**VICKY:**

Ha, ha, ha! Mela like me hux? My mother she say my father was a baruni, so my blood mixed, blue and red ... ha, ha violet.

**TRACY:**

A business man is best. They show you to the tax people as one of their workers.

**VICKY:**

Mela they are crazy the Maltese businessman?

**TRACY:**

No they are all looking for their own substitute mother. The best love. Once I had a Hungarian princess who was a ballet dancer.

She was running away from the revolution and became a chanteuse here in Strait Street, until I found her a rich Maltese businessman.

**VICKY:**

Shan-tess? Gimme that brandy again.

**TRACY:**

Shan-toos ... is singer in French... go easy... soak the wound softly and keep it clean... So what do you say? Will you join my girls?

**VICKY:**

You English all crazy. Mela you don’t know my husband?

**TRACY:**

No I don’t. And I don’t believe he exists either. Not if you say he lets you keep all the money you make. How does he live then ... on air?

**VICKY:**

Ha, ha ... he has a good job ... he’s a policeman.

**TRACY:**

A policeman who pimps for his wife? Pull the other one! I thought I had heard it all before! It can’t be true. You are making this up.

**VICKY:**

No it’s true I tell you. He loves me too. I look after his mother, miskina. She is very sick. With my money I buy her, her cigarettes, whiskey and lottery tickets. She eats with us. She cannot walk and we are on the sixth floor in Strada Stretta, we all live together in two little rooms, no toilet.

**TRACY:**

Does she know you’re a whore?

**VICKY:**

It’s her place, she was born here.

**TRACY:**

So where do you see your bleeding clients?

**VICKY:**

I have a bed under the stairs, behind the bar.

**TRACY:**

It’s tarts like you what gives us barmaids a bad name. (Laughs) Har, har, har! And your Pawlu, doesn’t he pay for his mother’s needs.

**VICKY:**

You see? Even you, you ask me questions.

**TRACY:**

Usually the fights here are friendly. It is like a Friday night sport. Some drunken sailors want to fight unarmed Maltese policemen. First they fight then they drink together.

**VICKY:**

Imma last night not sailors taf, commandoes they were.

**TRACY:**

What 45 Commando?

**VICKY:**

Mela! Many, many more they were. Hundreds! That’s why the trouble, hux. The police called the waiters to help them, and then they start throw bottles and then one of the little boys went to the market in Merchants Street and called the butchers. They came with their long knives, hux. Umbaghad the military police came. They cannot touch the Maltese. Everyone was arrested except the ones who were on the floor, hurt, with the blood or fainted. I was hit with a knife and I came running in here in the men’s toilet. I sent my second daughter to get you. She speak English not like me, you know, miskina.

**TRACY:**

Vee, me dear, your husband is a policeman, he will protect you.

**VICKY:**

What him? He will go crazy and go and kill a commando.

**TRACY:**

Sorry Vee, but it was the Maltese butchers what had the long knives, not the commandoes.

**VICKY:**

My Pawlu don’t care. He likes beating up the English for nothing.

**TRACY:**

That’s not fair in’it? After all, they give you a lot of money.

**VICKY**

Ha ha ha. That’s why he like to beat them up. They use his wife... he beats them up.

**TRACY:**

Oh yes, beats up the British? You will see what you will be





missing next year when Malta becomes independent and the British leave. Then who will your Pawlu beat?

**VICKY:**  
Don't tell him ... for nothing, he always beat the English. His father was the same, taf. Always fighting with the English!

**TRACY:**  
Was he a policeman too?

**VICKY:**  
Yes ... a sergeant when he disappeared.

**TRACY:**  
Disappeared?

**VICKY:**  
Ghax he was in the bread riots of the Sette Giugno in 1919 and they say he let the dockyard workers get into the Chronicle printing press and then they burn everything, you know, and then the English, they killed four Maltese and then Pawlu's father was always fighting with them for nothing and then he disappeared.

**TRACY:**  
Vee, you're making this up. This is an episode from that Pynchon book called Vee like you. There the old father disappears, but it's only a story in a book. Vee me dear, people don't just disappear.

**VICKY**  
Some, they say he ran away hiding on a ship to America. Some say it was trouble with women... insomma his wife still has his photo and is always praying he will come back.

**TRACY:**  
She still believes in prayer, your husband's mother?

**VICKY:**  
She believes in Santa Rita of the church of the Saint Wistin, round the corner. Santa Rita makes her win the lottery many times.

**TRACY:**  
Oh that's nice. Can you ask her to choose some numbers for me too? How can you believe such things, silly ducky?

**VICKY:**  
Ha... ha ... He is her son, hux? Cigarettes, whiskey and poker aye? He keeps all his money.

**TRACY:**  
So why the hell did you marry him?

**VICKY:**  
Me, I loved him because I have two daughters from my first two years as a prostitute. The older one is sixteen and she is coffee colour. It was an American, negro her father was. My Pawlu don't care, aye. He loves us all. He buys us clothes sometimes ... insomma ... those of the shops give him clothes or things, so he stay quiet, aye.

**TRACY:**  
Had you been one of me girls I wouldn't have let you marry him.

**VICKY:**  
I wanted his baby but.

**TRACY:**  
Did he give you one?

**VICKY:**  
Yes. My Bobby is ten now.

**TRACY:**  
You gave your son a dog's name?

**VICKY:**  
Because his father is a police aye. In London is a Bobby. I love my baby Bobby more than if he was like the others. He will always be innocent. He was born a bit ... you know ... retarded, they call them. He will always be five years old in his head. But we all love him just the same. His sisters adore him. They look after him for me.

**TRACY:**  
Downs syndrome? Your only son is Downs? You are an enigma Vee. You are out of a book.

**VICKY:**  
Ha ha what's an igmah? Crazy? Ha, ha, ha..... Ha, ha, ha!

**TRACY:**  
Shush! No, not crazy. You make us crazy. Vee, no one can understand what you are. You are bleeding to death in a toilet and you're laughing. You have a black bastard child and you are happy. You live in a dump with a sick old whore and you are paying for it. And your pimp is a policeman in uniform... You're a character out of a book ...well I'll never...!

**VICKY:**  
Ha, ha, ha...! What Tracy, what?

**TRACY:**  
(Choking in her coughing) Nothing Vee, nothing! Does your Pawlu beat you too?

**VICKY:**  
Nooooo! With me he is like a little boy. Especially after a fight! When he fights and gets hurt and sees blood he goes crazy. He laughs and laughs and comes running to me. He loves me more better after a fight. He is like a crazy dog, the more he suffer the more he wags his tail. (Laughs hysterically) Ha, ha, ha! Help me get up. Oi, oi, oi ... aaah! Istra it hurts.

**TRACY:**  
Sit there Vee, don't move. Look... Miss stupid, you're bleeding again. I don't know ... honestly ...you're something else ... are you sure you don't want a doctor to look at your wound?

**VICKY:**  
Uuuuu no istra! I said no. Don't you see if he tells the police they will take me to the police station and, you know, they ask me a lot of questions.

**TRACY:**  
Questions? Why? What are you hiding?

**VICKY:**  
If I tell them I was in the fight they will want to know who I saw fighting.

**TRACY:**  
Don't be silly. There are fights every night in Strait Street.

**VICKY:**  
Imma not like this one. This one had knives.

**TRACY:**  
Knives? Who had knives?

**VICKY:**  
No, no, but me also taf, I believe in Santa Rita.

**TRACY:**  
What you pray for winning lotto numbers too?



One of the many closed bars on present day Strait Street.





One of the many closed bars on present day Strait Street.

**VICKY:**

Every Friday I go to put some money in her box and pray that me and Pawlu, have another baby. But, this time, a girl. I want a girl so beautiful that when she grows up all the men want her, you know, but and then she will be making so much money she can look after me when I am old.

**TRACY:**

What if your Pawlu disappears, like his father. Will you come to me and work for me till I find you a businessman sugar-daddy.

**VICKY:**

No, no me, I think my Pawlu loves me and the children too much.

**TRACY:**

So you and I will never meet ... like Strait Street and St Paul's Street..... In you I can see myself in a mirror. You are loyal and your love is true .... I know you inside out.....Shush! ... Shush! (We hear footsteps and then cubicle doors banging)

**PAWLU**

(Shouting to someone outside) All clear! (We hear a door forced open, then the reaction of the women and TRACY being choked)

**TRACY:**

(Choking) Vee, Vee, stop him, he is choking me, help, help, Vee, Vee.

**PAWLU:**

Tracy I-ingliža hm! Tracy I-ingliža hm! What you doing to my wife you English bastid. You want me to kill you.

**VICKY:**

(Screaming) Pawlu, Pawlu, Pawlu! (Gnarls and bites him) Aggrrhm!

**PAWLU:**

(Screaming obviously hurt) Veeeeee!

**TRACY:**

(Breathless) Crazy family. You're all nuts. Monsters! Maltese bastards! Don't you ever dare sending for me again! (Her voice fades away). You almost choked me to death you piece of shit.

**VICKY:**

Quiet you. Leave her miskina Pawl. She make me the bandage, you stupid. Leave her ta...

**PAWLU:**

(To Vicky) Mela you know to speaking English you, when you want, missus Vee? With me, eh? With me you always don't know to speak English.

**VICKY:**

Ha ha ha... (sings) I am, thou art figolla, he is kilieli kolha, ha ha ha.

**PAWLU:**

Come here you dirty bugger. What you have in your mouth? That blood it is? Blood of my ear? Why you bite me eh? With me, always, you say no biting you dirty bugger. Come I show you ...come mela.

**VICKY**

Pawlu my dalink! ... Ha, ha, ha ... Your uniform. Look blood from my leg ... blood ... you crazy you ... already ....the uniform, mind... Aaaah... Slowly eh ... you hurt me ... look big cut .... Aaaah. Slowly man ...

**PAWLU:**

(Like a school child) Miss may I close the door please? (Door bangs and we hear latch slide)

**VICKY**

Iva stop you ... slowly hey ... you tear my v-neck haqq... ha ha ha. Slowly ... aaah it hurts ....aah.

**PAWLU:**

Mela say it, you dirty bugger, say it ... say it.

**VICKY:**

(She is groaning and in pain) Aaah! Yes. Aaaah! Blood, red blood! Aaaaah.

**PAWLU:**

Veeeeee! Veeeeee! Veeee!

**VICKY:**

Aaaaaah!

(We here a jukebox playing Paula Anka's Diana on sax)



One of the many closed bars on present day Strait Street.



# Narcy Calamatta

Narcy Calamatta is a career theatre artist. In his prodigious career in the arts he has acted, directed and designed the stage sets for productions of famous classical works by the likes of Plautus, De Vega, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Pirandello and O’Neil. Today we are meeting Narcy as a playwright and director. He has translated various foreign plays from Neil Simon’s comedies to those of Dario Fo. He has collaborated with other Maltese writers on translations, adaptations and original works like leading Maltese playwright, Anthony Portelli’s seminal play, Cella Numru 5.

Narcy has written and produced a number of original plays in English and Maltese, among which his innovative, Il-Faqqas u n-Nassab (1978) and the Commedia dell’Arte farce, Love Potion for Arlecchino (2009), both in English and Maltese. He has also written various episodes of his iconic TV comedy drama series, Wenzu w Rozi. He has written prize winning scripts for independent movies including The Pink Card (1974). Narcy has worked as a cultural journalist on Maltastar.com and The Hollywood Reporter of Los Angeles.

When Norbert approached me with a proposal of collaboration on one of his innovative installations I was both flattered and overwhelmed. He guided me steadily to adopt his concept. I got enamoured of the subject matter. For many years I was a neighbour of Strait Street and remember many dramatic episodes from my school days up to my army days in the Sixties. What I found wonderful about Norbert is his childlike joy in embracing my original theme of confronting the tensions between an older female pimp and the younger wounded prostitute. Norbert was enthusiastic about the paradoxical setting of an English female pimp giving first-aid to a young Maltese prostitute in the cubicle of a men’s toilet. But Norbert did not leave it there he kept coming back to me and relating his findings on Pynchon’s novel ‘V’ to my script. He handed me a heavily highlighted dissertation by Susan Elizabeth Sweeny: The V-Shaped Paradigm: Nabokov and Pynchon, for me to include as an undertone to my narration of the Strait Street anthropological phenomina in a street which foreign writers found so inspirational. In spying on my Vicky I was also influenced by Fellini’s, Notti di Cabiria and Sartre’s ‘La putain respectueuse’. As for the love/hate relationship emanating from old Tracy I blended the characteristics of real people I have known fondly. But again it was Norbert who chose the name Tracy to salute his Ka which is similar to the creativity of the controversial concept artist Tracey Emin. Notice the mis-spelling of the name Tracey. This is on the insistence of Norbert who wanted his slogan as a subversive graffiti on a wall. He also wanted to indicate the truth and fiction element by mis-spelling and by the reflection in the mirror. You have to hand it to the man, he delves deep.

NARCY CALAMATTA

I LOVE TRACY EMIN GRAFFITI IN STRAIT STREET







## Norbert Francis Attard

Norbert Francis Attard started as a self-taught painter and graphic artist (1965-1996) before turning to installation art in 1997. His present practice employs several disciplines including architecture, sculpture, video and photography to explore his major interests in places and their memories.

Born in Malta in 1951 and working in the sister island of Gozo, Attard blurs the boundaries of these disciplines both to incorporate the irreducible physicality of sites, but also to uncover and explore the sedimented layers of memory. Memory is both a product of place (and indeed is often inscribed in 'things') and social interaction (i.e. evoked implicitly in discourses), as well as a generative process (i.e. continuously redefined). Attard therefore explores the multilayered levels of meaning created with this triangulation through the displacement of signs and symbols to pose unsettling tensions between places, memories, and their representations. The relationship of his work to place and memory of site is fundamental, as is also his attempt to create balance and harmony through inter-relatedness of contradictory themes. He believes that no location is neutral, and that our sense of place is always shaped by past histories and contemporary ideologies.

He graduated in Architecture from the University of Malta in 1977, practicing the profession as architect for twenty years until 1996. Immediately after his University studies he lived in Germany in 1978 / 1979 working with the firm 'Licht in Raum', directed by Johannes Dinnebier, one of Germany's pioneers in light design.

Norbert Francis Attard has created many site-specific installations in several countries and has participated in many collective international exhibitions in the UK, Austria, Italy, Spain, Germany, Lithuania, Liechtenstein, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Greece, South Korea, Australia, USA, Mexico, Japan, Brazil, Cuba, Taiwan and China.

He has also participated in several Biennials and Triennials, including the 2nd Liverpool Biennial, 8th Havana Biennale, 5th Bienal Vento Sul, Brazil, 2nd Bienal de Canarias, Canary Islands, 25th Alexandria Biennial, Egypt, and in the 3rd Echigo Tsumari Triennale, Japan, amongst others. Attard represented Malta in the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999.

He is a founding member of stART (2002), a group of Maltese contemporary artists; a committee member of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (2002-2005) and director of GOZOcontemporary (2001), an art space, offering self-directed residencies to international and local artists, on the island of Gozo.



A small ground-floor room in Strait Street, corner with Old Theatre Street, provides the setting for an innovative new audio-visual installation by well-known Maltese artist Norbert Francis Attard. For this installation, Attard has placed inside the room, a rectangular neon light work that is positioned diagonally against a highly polished steel wall. Together with its reflection in the metal, the shape of the light forms a large ‘V’. The history of the site is central to the conceptual framework of the piece: This room is the entrance to a public convenience or latrine, close to which once stood a popular bar named ‘The Four Aces’, later called ‘Ye-old-Vic’, which is mentioned by American novelist Thomas Pynchon in his 1963 cult novel entitled V.

In the 1950s Pynchon came to Valletta’s harbour on a naval ship and visited the bars and clubs that lined the notorious Strait Street. This area was once known as ‘The Gut’, the legendary dark bowels of the city, renowned for seedy nightspots, dance halls and prostitutes. Here was Malta’s ‘red light zone’ which, together with key episodes from Maltese history, inspired some of the greatest scenes of his novel V. This short title reflects a sequence of ideas in the book, including Valletta, Veronica (‘true image’) and Victory/Victoria. The Malta chapters in V. shift between different moments of the island’s history – from the time of the famous Sette Giugno riots in 1919, to the war in 1942-43, to the time when Pynchon himself visited Malta, and finally to the siege of the Knights of St John in 1565. The heart of the quest and the themes of the novel all finally converge in Valletta. The novel mixes fact and fiction, illusion and reality, history and myth.

Like the novel, Attard’s work mixes illusion and reality, fiction and fact. The metal reflection also creates an inverted image of the twisted red neon letters. The mirrored red letters spell out ‘I LOVE TRACY EMIN’, the controversial British artist whose work repeatedly focuses on herself and her own sexuality. The choice of Emin is deliberate. The highly sexualised content of her work and its challenging

of mainstream and female sexual norms engages with the history of the site. Her nationality and the year of her birth, 1963, are also significant. 1963 was the year before Malta achieved independence and the year that Pynchon’s novel was published. Attard commissioned Nancy Calamatta to write the script for the sound component of his installation which is also set in the year 1963. The sound work is the recorded voice of a barmaid in conversation that drifts through the empty room, as though an echo of the street’s buried past is being overheard. The visitor becomes part of the work via the reflective surface and the overhearing of the audio conversation.

In Pynchon’s novel the letter V continuously shifts its shape and meaning, evolving in a sequence of words and ideas. In his work Attard explores this concept by affixing a series of words beginning with V on the glass of the low window opening onto the street, also placing side by side words with sexual or religious connotations. This again emphasises the installation’s direct engagement with its physical location in Strait Street where, for many years, prostitutes and bar maids worked at night under the niche statues of the Virgin Mary set in the facades of the buildings along the street.

Attard’s installation reverberates with the history of Malta and memories of the old Valletta Gut. It fuses Tracey Emin’s preoccupation with her own sexual experiences and Thomas Pynchon’s descriptions of late-night bar brawls, sailors and girls.

#### PETRA BIANCHI



ONE OF THE NICHEs OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN STRAIT STREET





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