



Review / Performance / Installation

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MALTA

In May earlier this year the artist Keit Bonnici walked on the steel barricades outside the parliament building at city gate, Valletta. His performative intervention was positioned as an act of resistance, and also perceived as such in the press. But I find myself asking, aside from the radical and photogenic act of rule breaking, does it really work, and if so, *how* does it work?

The piece played out across various platforms, Bonnici began to tease the idea of his performance on social media from before the act itself (this only became apparent in retrospect) and then, with no fanfare at all (I wasn't aware of the performance until after it happened), gathered a small group of friends and walked on the 36 mm wide steel-pipe bars of the barricades which, since the protests in 2019 that led to Joseph Muscat's resignation, have remained outside our parliament building. Bonnici was aided by a modified *palju* (a Maltese traditional hand fan) and a small wooden ladder that he used to climb onto the barricade. Both the *palju* and the ladder were made by the artist himself and the performance was followed by several posts on Bonnici's social media feeds, as well as an exhibition, detailing fragments of his process and teasing out the conceptual foundations that drove the work.

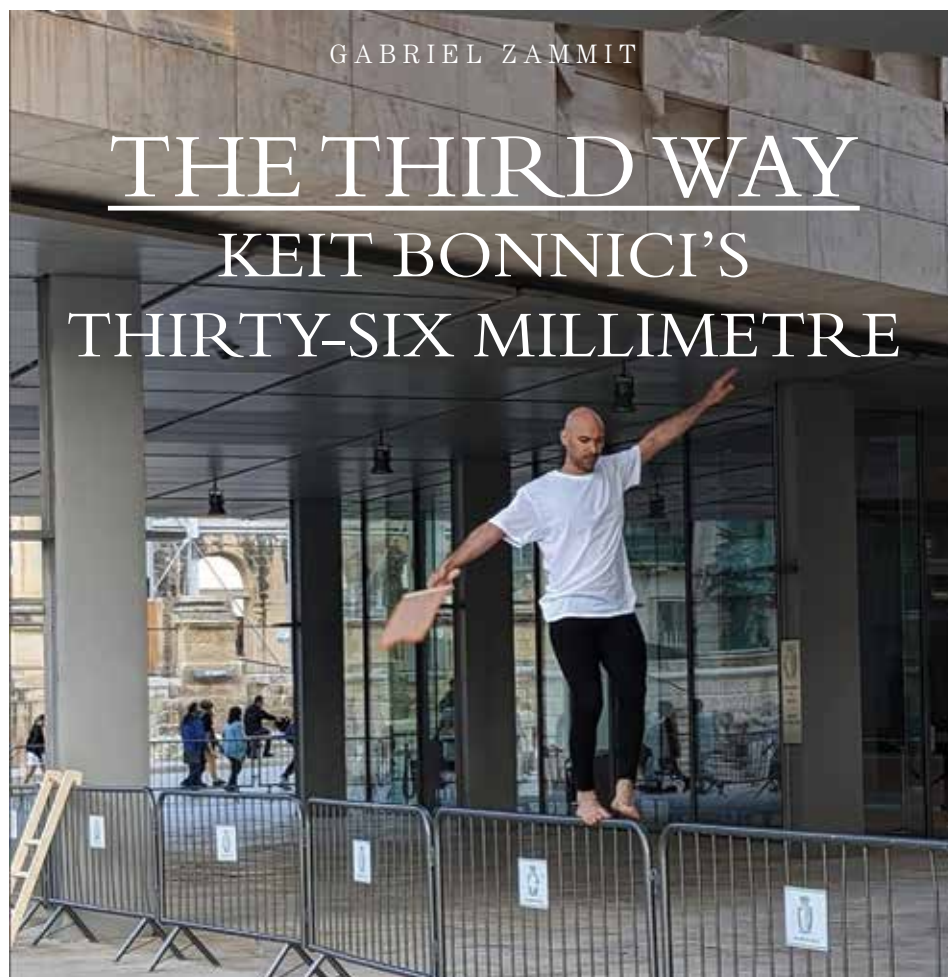
I think the piece was incredibly moving and beautiful in its vulnerability, although not entirely beyond critique.

Let me explain.

The juxtaposition of a fragile human body suspended on cold steel, framed by the hulking mass of the parliament building at dusk, is an image that remains seared onto the surface of my brain.

The delicate *palju*, an artefact from an old Malta that is being mourned, became a funeral lamentation but also, through the *palju's* reinvention - a scrappy reshaping and repurposing - a powerful message of hope that bypasses the usual nostalgia-soaked invocation of times-gone-by, alluding to possible futures, rather than an irretrievable past. This is further emphasised by the fact that the artist collaborated with his "crafty mum" to make the *palju*.

The steel barricades have been placed outside parliament to halt discourse, creating an adversarial environment outside the house of the people, designed flatten conversation into



dualities. What the barriers represent is the lack of nuance in politics and identity that has grown within the Maltese system. They were placed there to protect corrupt politicians from rioting mobs at a time when it had become obvious that the government had lost its legitimacy to govern the country. The barriers split the terms of the contest in two - you're either on one side or the other, blue or red, supporter or protester. Keit's performance enacts a narrative rewriting that echoes out beyond the artwork.

Suddenly, within the context of the current contemporary landscape, where we don't have any clear solid alternatives, Bonnici and his objects subvert this dualising force and create a new possibility. The steel barriered space is forced to bend to the will of the trickster artist. By treating the barriers as a game and teetering along them Bonnici finds a loophole that reorganises the space around a third way - that of being in-between - and the dichotomy is broken.

Thirty-six Millimetre shows us that it is possible to take back our spaces, places, and objects in a radical way which, assuredly but humorously, creates nuance and pushes against the will of an architecture hell-bent on control, all we need to do is find third possibilities within systems that appear to be closed.

It is fortunate that *Thirty-six Millimetre* has this constructive drive at its heart, because the message put forth (especially on social media) can become moralistic at times; "we all belong here./ You bought the metal" Bonnici writes in one of his posts. The angry tone adds nothing to the work that is not already present in some other form, and its cool criticality is ruptured at this juncture, becoming reactionary and didactic. In his post Bonnici claims a position apart from the wider 'you', drawing the work into its own hermetic world of the privileged 'I'. This would not ordinarily be a problem, but within the context of a work that has democratisation at its heart, it becomes one.

The project was also funded by Arts Council Malta, and there is an obvious question that immediately comes to mind - is it a compromise for a project with a powerfully critical edge to be funded by an arm of the government which it critiques?

Knowing Bonnici the piece would have happened anyway, funding or no funding, and there is no doubt in my mind that the money he received did not influence his decision making. But on a less tangible level the work is sanctioned and therefore claimed by an institution that is within the sphere of Bonnici's critique.

Does this change it?

ACM is an arms-length institution, but it is no secret that it is subject to the usual political string-pulling. At the same time though, without the Council's and therefore the government's support, the art world in Malta would not be what it is, both on the macro and micro scales. The funds it metes out are mainly taxpayer funds anyway, and they enable projects in a very real way, my own included, so I can't see a clear link between political machinations that happen behind closed doors and independent projects of this scale. In material terms I don't feel it is an issue. However, the question hangs in my mind unresolved, and I don't have an answer, because in non-material terms *it is not nothing*.

Bonnici's work can be contextualised within a group of loosely organised individuals creating 'anti-system' art that looks for alternative ways of looking at the world.

Romeo Roxman Gatt, and Tom van Malderen, for example, who, each in their own distinct way look for little glitches within the systems that enable and constrain us, playfully subverting social norms and questioning hidden power structures. More directly correlated to Bonnici's work is Florinda Camilleri's movement project that reclaimed Castille Square in 2022 and looked to non-human perspectives for new possibilities of *being* in public space. There are many more artists who I could mention here, but the purpose of placing Bonnici's work within this group is to characterise, in very general terms, a way of thinking that has developed within the contemporary Maltese cultural landscape and which uses rule breaking as a form of meaning making.

Thirty-six Millimetre functions via an oblique beauty and a logic of paradox that makes barriers porous (literally) and solidifies contradictions into a meaningful act. It does not fall into the trap of cynicism or dualism and uses materials, craft, and mischievousness to find loopholes for creating a new middle ground by subverting power against itself. The work brings a moment of intimacy to a reality that radiates alienation, and it acts as a beacon of hope for what art can deliver by way of creating new possibilities where there appear to be none.

We can all learn from Bonnici's work. ①