

AMYGDALA

BLITZ



KIM SAMMUT

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CURATED BY SARA DOLFI AGOSTINI

12 JANUARY – 9 FEBRUARY 2023

SUPPORTED BY



KIM SAMMUT AMYGDALA

I do not 'show' my naked body! I AM BEING MY BODY

Carolee Schneemann

Kim Sammut is a Maltese artist employing drawing, photography and video. The bidimensional reality she creates offers a glimpse into what it means today for a young woman, an artist, to tell a story of emancipation — one that has its loopholes and crossroads, at a time marred by fractures in politics and civil society, new wars near and far, climate change and an all-encompassing sense of fragility. Contrary to the generation of artists that preceded her, for whom the internet was often both subject and platform¹, Sammut focuses on real bodies and things. Her work is an attempt at visualizing the existential gap between inner and outer worlds in order to explore the ephemeral sense of self, cognitive and sensorial disorientation, resistance and eventual drift — all intensified by the rise of the virtual self. Her references in art history range from the visceral Expressionist portraits of Egon Schiele to the vibrant and liberating social bodies of Carolee Schneemann and the otherworldly time-based performances of Marina Abramović — particularly *The Artist is Present* (2010), during which the Serbian conceptual artist silently sat for 700 hours in front of the visitors of MoMA New York.

Sammut's interest for "true reality" — to quote Abramović² — is not staged in front of an audience. It happens behind closed doors and becomes visible in her artworks, to which she refers as "a collection of moments", drawn in her many sketchbooks, or re-enacted for the camera. Like many Generation Z art students growing up in countries lacking a local contemporary art museum, Sammut built her knowledge of art largely through books and screens. As such, her "socially distant" coming of age as an artist during the Covid-19 pandemic did not produce distress or isolation. During these last two years, Sammut took the time to explore the idea of impermanence as a universal condition which crosses worlds, from microscopic particles to hyperobjects³, and extended her investigations to the freshly demystified notion of mental health, an umbrella concept allowing discussion of the connections between states of mind, actions, behaviors and the physical phenomenon of the body from an existential perspective.

Amygdala, the title of her first institutional solo exhibition, takes its inspiration from the region of the brain that receives inputs from all senses and processes emotions. As the primary interpreter of images and sounds, the amygdala can trigger a survival mechanism, known as the "fight-or-flight" response, in order to react quickly to life-threatening situations⁴. At Blitz Valletta, *Amygdala* is an intimate collective self-portrait delving into the quest for identity of young adults living out of sync with a commodified present which leaves no space for self-expression beyond money-making products. It is a present that Sammut keeps off-stage — the human body and its surroundings are stripped off all socio-cultural references except for a few clues — and yet we can feel its unsettling presence outside of the frame.

To protect the bare self, Sammut conceived a shrine-like space, disconnected from the hectic life of the capital city. Behind a heavy curtain, the visitor is invited to enter a dark room illuminated by spotlights, as if they were stars pinpointing a piece of a personal universe. A sense of intimacy pervades everything, especially the small drawing, *Yielding* (2019), which stands on top of a grey plinth camouflaged by a carpeted floor of the same color. Drawn on a sketchbook page, it shows a minimal version of Sammut — a vertical, thin body filled with black ink, then prolonged into a curved neck and ending with the outline of her head, empty yet heavy. The body and the head are not aligned; the body leans forward, the head follows, and there is no fragmentation as seen in the work of many international artists, from Louise Bourgeois to Robert Gober. Sammut's struggle is contained in one unit.

On opposite walls, at different heights from the floor, *Resilience* (2021) and *Embody* (2021) are photographs of a nude model caught in an aseptic environment, her head enclosed in animal-like positions seemingly inspired by Yoga and meditation. Sammut's bodies suggest an act of energy preservation, visually enhanced by the powerful decision to cover the head, home of the mind. Standing one in front of the other, they represent dualism, Yin and Yang, the inhale — exhale act of breathing, as one body's extension is the other one's contraction in an almost fetal position.

In between them stands *Morph* (2021), a video of mismatched audio and images intended to create an unfamiliar territory of landscapes and sensations, save for quick drops of rain touching the sea — an homage to Alan Watts' ideology of water⁵. Just like a visual diary, it presents an elliptical, looped compilation of scenes exposing the beating passage of time with a black and white aesthetic. The audio, a collaboration with sound artist Jamie Barbara, mixes natural and synthetic sounds, although it seems to revolve around a ticking clock and a breathing organism, an amalgam of human and thing.

Here, Sammut portrays different states of matter — solid, liquid, air — as her body shapeshifts into hybrid forms, windy scaffoldings and fidgeting pigeons, awkward

1. In the early 2010s, Post-Internet came to refer to a movement in art exploring the condition of life influenced by the mainstream use of digital technology in the Western world.

2. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>.

3. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013.

4. Understanding the stress response, 6 July 2020, Harvard Health Publishing. Link: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>.

5. Alan Watts was a British philosopher naturalized in the U.S. who became a renown Western interpreter of Eastern disciplines such as the Chinese philosophy of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. His writings and lessons deeply influenced the American counter-cultural movement in the 60s.

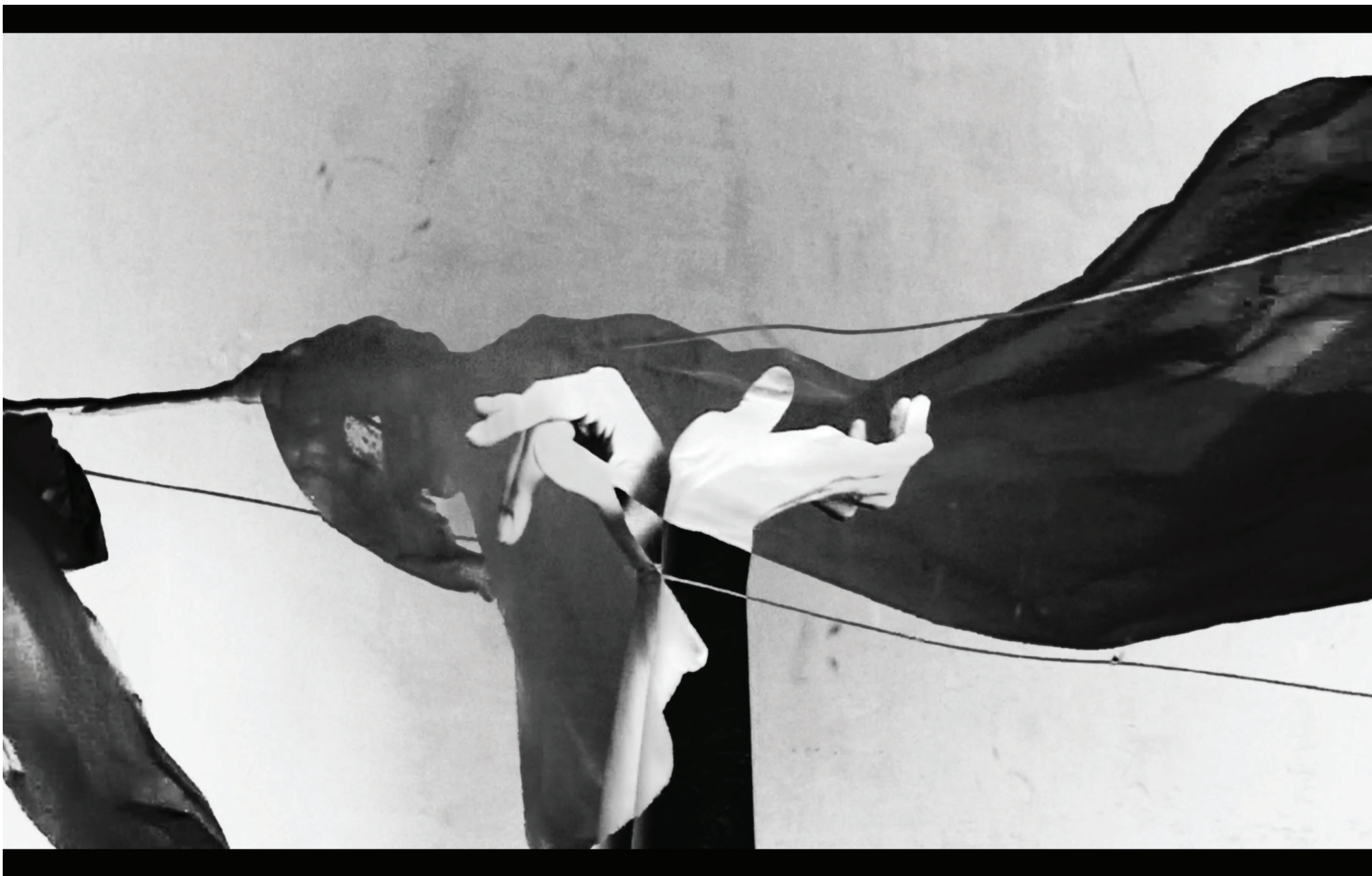
symbols of an urban landscape fast-evolving for the pockets of the few devoted to real estate and tourism. For Sammut, Malta feels at times both home and foreign. Her camera also blows up eyes, feet and hands, hinting at her whole body being equally engaged in a process of sporadic change clashing with loud claims of evolution and progress. Capturing the projection of *Morph* on the opposite wall stands a mirror reflecting the video as well as the visitor casually moving in the space. The artist thereby leaves no choice for the visitor but to enter her artwork twice – forward and backward – in order to see the rest of the exhibition.

In an everyday life where fake smiles and manipulated realities fill the flood of images at our fingertips, Kim Sammut's candid world of pictures carves out space for the soul, outside of the clichés of our daily media diet.

– Sara Dolfi Agostini



Yielding, 2019
Ink on sketchbook paper
14,5 x 21cm
Courtesy the artist



Morph, 2021
Video, 4' 07"
Projection, mirror, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist



Embody, 2021
Baryta print
100 x 70 cm
Courtesy the artist



Resilience, 2021
Baryta print
100 x 70 cm
Courtesy the artist

KIM SAMMUT

Kim Sammut's work mostly features the human figure, albeit occasionally obscured by layers of abstraction. Born in 1997, Sammut is currently finishing her third year reading for a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Fine Arts with Psychology at the University of Malta.

Earlier, during her studies at MCAST Institute for the Creative Arts, in 2018, she had the opportunity to deepen her knowledge of darkroom photography and book publishing at Zed Creative Studio under artist Zvezdan Reljic's supervision.

Sammut first exhibited her work in the collective exhibition {V} in 2021 at Spazju Kreattiv, Valletta. The following year, she was selected for the SPRING Programme by Gabriel Caruana Foundation, and exhibited her work in a group show at The Mill in Birkirkara. Her work was also included in *MARA*, a group show organised in 2022 at the Bureau Iniala in Valletta.

Kim Sammut is the recipient of Blitz Valletta's competitive Open Call for a Malta-based emerging artist launched in 2022. As the chosen artist, Kim Sammut was granted the opportunity to present a new project produced and exhibited by Blitz. This initiative is intended to give the successful applicant a curated platform to express themselves, an occasion to work one-to-one with an international curator on a new commission and improve their professional skills while promoting their artistic practice, while Blitz acts as a host institution, a mentor and partner.

SARA DOLFI AGOSTINI, CURATOR

Sara Dolfi Agostini is an Italian American contemporary art curator, writer and lecturer based in Malta and Naples, Italy. She has worked for international institutions such as Manifesta, Trento, Italy (2008) the International Sculpture Biennale of Carrara, Italy (2010), co-curated the public art project ArtLine Milano for the City of Milan, Italy (2013-16) and served as honorary member of the advisory board on photography of the Triennale Museum in Milan (2017-21).

She moved to Malta in 2017 and in mid-2018 she joined the curatorial team of Blitz Valletta, where she curated the public programme and solo exhibitions of Rossella Biscotti (2019), Sara Cwynar (2019), Tobias Zielony (2019) and Marinella Senatore (2022); a double solo show with Ahmet Öğüt and Adelita Husni-Bey (2019); and two group shows. The first, *Face with Tears of Joy* (2019), with artists Cory Arcangel, Simon Denny, Andy Holden, Maurice Mbikayi, Alexandra Pace, Rob Pruitt, Paul Sochacki, Amalia Ulman, and Serena Vestrucci; and the second, *Gravity* (2021), with Kane Cali, John Coplans, Jesse Darling, Simon Fujiwara, Eva Kořátková, Adrian Paci and Pierre Portelli. Besides bringing the international art scene to Malta, she has also curated dedicated presentations of Maltese artists abroad at Barely Art Fair Chicago (2019), Contemporary Istanbul (2019) and Paris Internationale (2021).

Sara Dolfi Agostini has worked in public spaces too. In 2020 she curated an outdoor project with artist Nico Vascellari in response to the lockdowns and the closing of the Valletta harbour to migrants. Then, in 2021 she curated the performance at sea *The Journey* by artist Rossella Biscotti, a co-production of Blitz Valletta, KunstenFestivalDesArts Brussels and Dream City Festival in Tunis, and in 2022 she curated one of the 10th anniversary performances of *The School of Narrative Dance*, in Malta's capital city Valletta, with 100 local participants. Moreover, with Blitz Valletta's director Alexandra Pace, in April 2020 she launched OPEN, an online spin off of the art institution. For OPEN, she curated the online exhibition *The Eye of The Storm* (2020), featuring artists David Claerbout, Jonathas De Andrade, Elena Mazzi / Sara Tirelli, Aernout Mik, Laure Prouvost and Pilvi Takala – and the Blitz Digital Residency programme 2022/23. Since December 2021, she is also curator and coordinator of the catalogue raisonné at the Paul Thorel Foundation in Naples, Italy, launched with a dedicated exhibition at Artissima 2022.

Since 2008 she has been a regular contributor to the newspaper Il Sole 24 ORE, and guest writer for Art Basel Stories, Elephant, Flash Art International, KLAT, Camera Austria, Rivista Studio, Il Giornale dell'Arte and Artribune. In addition, she was an adjunct faculty member for Master's programmes at Fondazione Modena Arti Visive (2016-2021), previously also at IAAD in Turin (2017), and has lectured at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago (2016), the Art Program / World Bank Headquarters in Washington, DC (2016), the University of Malta (2017) - and frequently at Il Sole 24 ORE Master School (2010-2016) and NABA, both in Milan (2009-2013).

BLITZ, VALLETTA

Blitz was founded in 2013 as a grassroots, artist-run contemporary arts space, and it is housed in a four-level, typical Valletta townhouse, which was originally the family home of founder Alexandra Pace's grandparents. After standing empty for over 30 years, the building slowly started returning to life through a dedicated and steady restoration process. Now, Blitz is a reference for contemporary art in Malta, and each of its floors shines in its full former glory with a project space for public programmes and workshops, an in-house artist residency and the exhibition galleries.

Since its founding, Blitz has formed an identity and a presence which has extended beyond the island to the international art world, through prominent collaborations with institutions such as Royal College of Arts (London), Central Saint Martins University of the Arts (London), the European Graduate School (EGS) and the annual Network of European Museum Organizations conference (NEMO). In 2015 Blitz launched the Residency Programme which invited artists from Berlin, London, Wrocław, Athens, Kuwait, Paris and Istanbul to participate via open calls with more than 200 applicants. Also, Blitz has received important mentions by ArtBasel Crowdfunding initiative (2015), and Tate Art Exchange Programme (2016).

In 2018 curator Sara Dolfi Agostini joined the artistic team of Blitz Valletta. Today, Blitz's international programme reflects the institution's commitment to support and showcase Malta-based artists abroad, in high profile international platforms dedicated to non-profit art spaces. Simultaneously, its exhibition and public programmes at home are currently focused on introducing the Maltese community to the practice of established international artists such as Cory Arcangel, Rossella Biscotti, Sara Cwynar, Simon Denny, David Claerbout, Adrian Paci, Simon Fujiwara, Amalia Ulman, Tobias Zielony, to name a few.

Their works have never been exhibited in Malta before, yet specifically resonate with Malta's unique history, culture and social landscape as much as with the major challenges of our present society. For Blitz, Malta is an inspiring artistic laboratory offering a bridge between past and future, from the Megalithic temples, Baroque churches and masterpieces by Caravaggio, to the growing internet, gaming, blockchain, and new media industries.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Blitz decided to operate in three spaces equally relevant to its community – online with the new platform OPEN which now hosts the Blitz Digital Residency programme, in the physical galleries and in the city of Valletta. Integrating these three spaces, Blitz explores the possibilities to reinvent the notion of a shared, public space for collective thinking. Since the reopening, Blitz has also co-produced the international commission *The Journey* by artist Rossella Biscotti together with KunstenFestivalDesArts Brussels and Dream City Festival in Tunis.

Blitz's activities have been featured in some of the most relevant international media – Artforum, Folha de S.Paulo, Flash Art International, Mousse Magazine, Weltkunst, Sole 24 ORE, Atribune and Abitare.

CREDITS

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