

InitiArt Magazine

YOUR ONLINE INTERVIEW ART MAGAZINE

Interview : Francesco VEZZOLI



Francesco Vezzoli, photo by Jason Schmidt. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

The Prince of Charm masters the technique of persuasion.

Since his first appearance in the international art scene in the mid-1990s, Francesco Vezzoli (*1971, Brescia, Italy) has successfully enlisted celebrities to take part at his mega-spectacles: he cast Milla Jovovich, Courtney Love and Helen Mirren in a trailer for an non-existent remix of the X-rated 1979 film *Caligula* (2005); he persuaded Natalie Portman and Michelle Williams to catfight for a fictitious perfume commercial directed by Roman Polanski in *Greed* (2009); his most impressive crew list in one single event comes as a recipe of superstars – “Lady Gaga don a hat designed by Frank Gehry while playing a piano painted by Damien Hirst, as members of the Bolshoi Ballet danced alongside”. While describing his work often involves an exhausting amount of name-dropping, what matters for the artist is the reality of the world in which we live and the reality of the art industry in which we operate. As the artist says, "we live in a very baroque and surreal moment, despite the fact that we're aiming to be correct and moderate."

The Prince of Charm has his moments of melancholy.

Vezzoli uses the solitary and obsessive technique of embroidery to mix the symbols of mass media society with the heterogeneous cultural references of his childhood. He likes indulging his fascination with figures cast in the limelight and his penchant for glamour, nostalgia and intelligent tragicomic clashes

of high and low brow. Call him a satirist, a conceptualist, a post-Warholian, a diva-and-Prada-obsessed, an institutional critic, a descendant of Duchamp-Dali-Warhol mixture, a melodrama-queen... He would probably reply you, "I don't care. I do what I need to do".

At the occasion of Francesco Vezzoli's recent exhibition **OLGA FOREVER** on view in Almine Rech Gallery (Brussels) until 02 March 2013, we have had the artist to share with us his concepts of art-making and points of view on the art industry today.

Selina Ting
Brussels, 30 January 2013

FV – Francesco Vezzoli
ST – Selina Ting of initiArt Magazine

On Olga and Women in Pain



Francesco Vezzoli, (left) Olga Forever (Olga Picasso, London, ca. 1919), 2012. Oil on canvas, laserprint and embroidery collage, 121 x 84 cm (47 5/8 x 33 1/8 inches). (right) Olga Forever (Olga Picasso, 1940s), 2012. Oil on canvas, laserprint and embroidery collage, 121 x 84 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech Gallery.

ST: "Olga weeps for all the ballets she never danced out of love for Picasso". You started the project on Olga Khokhlova by researching into the Olga Ruiz-Picasso Archives, and came out of it with an imagined regret that might not exist in the archives. This calls to mind the interplay between fiction and reality that has been very present in your work. Are you particular interested in a kind of presumed void or creating a void in reality?

FV: I was fascinated by Olga, and the foundation [Fundacion Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte] offered me the access to research in the family photos archives. I studied the life of Olga and I could only respond to the information I had about her life. It's very obvious that she gave up something of herself for her husband. The fact that her husband is Pablo Picasso is relevant and irrelevant at the same time. It's a story of a famous woman, a very intelligent, sensitive and talented woman.

But it could be just the story of many women – many women in their life have given up things for their husband. So, it's not so much about fiction for me. I don't want to be invasive or to presume anything. Maybe it's an attempt for me to learn or to give an interpretation from a very personal point of view, but also in a very discrete way.

ST: Embroidering tears to the portraits of female celebrities is a very gentle and subtle way of showing sympathy towards these women. In your video work, you go one step further by substituting yourself in the position of these women. You were the one who's doing the needlework at a corner, very withdrawn and isolated. You were taking up the position of these public female figures at moment of suffer, while they reassumed their glamour and power.

FV: When I started the needlework pieces about the actresses, supermodels, female celebrities, I assume that the moment when they did the needlework in their private life, they would retreat to themselves and they demand privacy. It is a very solipsistic practice. These are the projections of my sensibility on their public identity.

My fictional interpretation, if you want, is for me to project my pain onto their life. But there is no mystery about that. It's like any movie director telling the story of public fear or a writer writing a biography on a famous figure, in the process we give interpretation to other people's life by projecting our own life into it. It's very natural for an artist to deal with public figures and to project onto them his or her own feelings, that's the interpretation we did. For me, Olga is crying for the Ballets Russes that she never did, because I am crying for the Ballets Russes that I have never seen.



Francesco Vezzoli, *The End* (teleteatro), An embroidered Trilogy, 1999. Still from video, DVD, 4 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

ST: How do you approach these women? Do you identify yourself more with women in pain?

FV: Well, it's interesting because being homosexual, you could say that I identify myself more with woman. The point is: men never allow themselves to express their pain. If there had been a famous crying man in the cinema, I would like to do something on that. I would say the focus of my work is pain, after certain point. I am an over-sensitive person and I tend to project my pain onto the other people.

ST: As a way to heal...

FV: [Laughs] Probably! It's a very universal theme as well.

ST: Yes, it's very universal. Can we say that the pain you deal with is more private than human suffering?

FV: OK, this is really to give you an insight about some of my works. [Laughs] I read newspapers. Everything reported, for example from Israel, I am deeply concerned. But then, a shorter article at the bottom of the page tells that this year 120 women were killed in domestic violence in Italy. I read the war in Israel. I read the 120 women killed in Italy. I would never make art on the Israeli war. I would feel totally inadequate to do such a thing. It's totally out of place for me to go onto the public stage and say, "I have something to say about this". Many people do. But I would feel that I need to study the history, political positioning of all the parties concerned, etc.

There is one thing I would like to say, many people wash their consciousness or their sense of grief by speaking about the war. But there is a war in every country. There is a war in Belgium that 100 people die in every six months because they drink too much... That's a war, a psychological war! It's the war of pain! People are in pain and find different devices to survive this pain! But pain is there and pain makes you die. Isn't that a war?

ST : It's a conflict. People are fighting against themselves and the society.

FV : Yes, it's a conflict! I feel I am drowned to discuss those stories of private pain rather than going onto the podium and say which country is right and which country is wrong...

ST: The danger in contemporary art when dealing with pain, love or any other private sentiments is the fine line between poetry and kitsch. Most artists find it offensive to have his or her works labeled as kitsch. Does it bother you?

FV: But I am having the opposite problem. I think the kitsch ones are those who appropriated the war in Vietnam in the 70s or the war in the Middle-East in their art. I found them kitsch. I think I am not kitsch because I am discussing something I may know about, something that I may feel close to. If I take a political position and put up a political exhibition that costs a lot of money, I think that's kitsch.

ST: Because that connection sounds artificial to you?

FV: It's artificial, because they read newspapers and books, then make a statement and put up a show that costs one million dollar in a fancy gallery in New York. They sell the pieces and make more than one million dollar, then they continue to make their political statements and they are very happy! All these for me are very kitsch! Unless you give half of that million to save the war! [Laughs]

I am talking about private pain because it is something we are close to. It's in our everyday life. It's a concrete fact of life. I am talking about things that I know. I don't know all about Picasso, but I know women who give up their public life for the love of their husband. I am discussing Olga in this sense and I am trying to discuss the topic that I can be close to.

But it doesn't mean that I don't have a political opinion. I came from a family that educated me to have ideas and political opinions. I was very strongly political-oriented since I was a kid, but I would never put that into my art. I would find it intellectually kitsch, totally out of place, very pretentious.

On Artists and the Art Industry

[Click here to see the video](#)



Francesco Vezzoli, GREED, a New Fragrance by Francesco Vezzoli (2009). 1 min - Short - 2009 (USA). Courtesy of the artist.

ST: Two quotes from your previous interviews. The first one on your reference to Duchamp, you said “There’s no real intellectual agenda. Just to say how much I loved that part of his work”. Second quote on the Greed project: “It would be very easy for me to claim territory on this project and say that it has a critical and moral stance, etc., but I don’t like to sell this version.” Do you purposely shrug away from any elitist or intellectual connotation in your art?

FV: I don’t go to the stage of the art world to make drama! I am more interested in soliciting debates.

ST: it’s very ambiguous, because as an artist who’s making art with a meaning, you do have a statement to make. After that, there is the ambivalent attitude of assuming it or not...

FV: I feel myself more as an amplifier; I don’t see myself as a singer. If I had to choose another job other than artist, I would have been a journalist. Of course journalists do have to have an opinion on things, but at the same time, they are supposed to describe facts rather than giving interpretations, which is historians’ job. Between a historian and a journalist, I am a journalist.

ST: Are you not bothered by the danger that your work is often interpreted in a superficial way?

FV: It’s very often interpreted in a polished superficial way, but I try not to look at them. It’s not my problem if they don’t want to read the books, the interviews, the articles written on my work. I have published so many books, so many people have written about my work profoundly. But it’s true that for the majority, once they see a movie star in my work, they just got stuck to think that it’s all about the movie star.



Francesco Vezzoli, *Democracy* (video still), 2007. Double Projection video, colour, son, 1 min. Unicredit Group Collection. Courtesy of the artist.

In my work, especially the films, when people see Sharon Stone, they only see Sharon Stone. They don't want to know that I went to Washington to work on the project with the media advisors of George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and John McCain. And I can reassure you that it was far more complicated to get the advisors than to get Sharon Stone! [Laughs] So I gave up. I don't care, I do what I need to do... they can criticize or they can just not to criticize...

There are so many people going out there to give talks, seminars, teachings, and then one day you suddenly find out that these people don't have the integrity that they are selling to you! I just don't want to belong to this kind of people. I would rather downplay my role than playing preacher. I would rather be mistaken as a dandy! Then if one day people want to see in-depth of my work, they are welcome. There are a lot of depths!

ST : Is there a deconstructionist approach in the way your work functions within the system of the art today?

FV : The main issue here is that, I am not interested in discussing art or the nature of my art unless we discuss first of all the state of the industry I belong to. This is something that I get very aggressive about. In the 1970s, there were only a few museums and galleries, collectors. There were only a few former aristocrats who went crazy and would put Arte Povera in their houses! Contemporary art was like a small, crazy religion. Now, there are more followers in the art world than in any religious group! The art economy becomes gigantic. There is an ever-expanding number and size of art galleries, museums, fairs, journalists, blogs, magazines... This is a huge industry and we are all part of it by profession!

My point is, some artists, for me, are still making political proclaims or statements as if they would belong to a very small industry, the industry of philosophical books! But this has nothing to do with the contemporary art industry! It's too huge; you can't get into the industry as a philosopher...

Some people are talking like preachers but they are fooling themselves about the fact that they place their preaching into a context, and this makes absolutely no sense, because it's a context that functions like a Duty-Free store! Artists should re-adjust their thinking according to the industry to which they belong, not in a corrupted way, but they have to adjust.



Francesco Vezzoli, 24 Hr Museum, Palais d'Iena, Paris. 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

ST: Is Art defining the industry or the industry defining the Art?

FV: As far as I am personally concerned, I am interested in the discussion of the role of an artist in the art world and in the society today. I don't have an answer for it, but to do that, I would like to sit down on the table with people who have more or less experiences in the gigantic structure. Some people just refuse to admit the existence of this industry. Does it make sense to make art that is against the industry? Are these artists going to be able to defeat the existence of this industry? Where are they exhibiting their art? In places that have the integrity to protect their statement or not? This is the topic that interests me!

I feel safe because I am not making art against the industry! I am just being honest and I know my limit. Why would I be an idiot going around and saying I hate this and that, and at the same time exhibit my work in a fancy gallery?

ST :What about the whole movement of the Institutional Critique? How do you see it?

FV : Critics said that my work belongs to institutional critique. But I am not making a critique, I am doing a portrait. It's different. There might be a critical aspect in my portraits but it doesn't move me. The focus of my work is not the Institutional Critique. There is more to it. I am talking about discussing together the system of the art world, the industry: Do we accept or not the existence of an industry? This is the step one. I decided that the industry exists and I am totally fine with it.

ST: I interviewed Tino Sehgal, and he formulates his approach to the institutions or the art system but saying that he is not trying to break the system of the museum with the immaterial art but to propose experiments and to expand the possibilities and conventions of what are acceptable in a museum context. In a way, he's exposing the limits of what a museum can cater for, but at the same time investing new capacities to the museum.



Installation view, Francesco Vezzoli, *OLGA FOREVER! – The Olga Picasso Family Album*, 2013, Brussels. Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech Gallery.

Francesco Vezzoli

OLGA FOREVER! – The Olga Picasso Family Album

28 Nov 2012 – 02 March 2013

Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels

About the Artist

Francesco Vezzoli was born in 1971, in Brescia, Italy. He currently lives and works in Milan. Vezzoli studied at the Central St. Martin's School of Art in London from 1992 to 1995.

His work has been exhibited at many institutions including: "The Films of Francesco Vezzoli," The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2002); Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin (2002); Fondazione Prada, Milan (2004 and 2005); Museu Serralves, Porto (2005); Le Consortium, Dijon (2006); "Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story (Part One)," Tate Modern, London (2006); "Dalí Dalí Featuring Francesco Vezzoli," Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2009-2010); "Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story!" Kunsthalle Wien (2009); the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow (2010); SFMoMA, San Francisco (2011), and "24H Museum", Palais d'Iena, Paris (2012).

Past performances include "Right You Are (If You Think You Are)," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (2007) and "Ballets Russes Italian Style (The Shortest Musical You Will Never See Again)," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2009).