



FRANCESCO VEZZOLI BY GERMANO CELANT

PROOF THAT EXPERIMENTATION IS ALIVE AND WELL IN ART

GERMANO CELANT: As part of your latest installation, "Trilogy of Death"—on view at Milan's Prada Foundation through the 16th of this month—you created *Comizi di non-Amore (Non-Love Meetings)*, a reality TV show that was inspired in part by Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Comizi d'Amore* [1965]. Like Pasolini's movie, it's a kind of survey about love, though I gather your aim was to make it less of a

documentary and allow for more creativity than Pasolini's film. What else can you tell us about the project?

FRANCESCO VEZZOLI: I started by talking with a production company. I explained to them that I wanted to produce a reality show but that I also wanted to keep my identity protected so I could keep the vibe of the project and people's behavior more natural. They gave me their set

designers, their lighting directors, their scriptwriters, their directors—all of whom are among the best in their fields—and they packaged a bona fide television show, under my supervision, in which all the participants were unaware that this project would be presented in a museum instead of on television. Obviously I had the help of the director and the producers, but very often I would be asked to make artistic or aesthetic

decisions. My answer was always the same: Do exactly what you would do for a project that you would be selling to a TV station.

GC: What about the concept of the show?

FV: Well, of course, I brought the idea of creating what we can call a celebrity dating show to the table. It's a reality show in which people tell their life stories. By bringing their individual realities onto the scene, various women court potential dates. Then there's the celebrity aspect of it, meaning that some of the contestants are icons to a cinematically sophisticated audience, some are completely unfamiliar to a standard television audience, and some are familiar only to a television audience while totally unfamiliar to a cinephile audience.

GC: How did you choose your contestants?

FV: I chose what I would call a pantheon of icons of femininity, but a femininity that touches upon different aspects of itself and different mythologies. We started with Catherine Deneuve, a woman who in *Belle de Jour* [1967] does needlepoint and has daring fantasies. Then there are Antonella Lualdi, who serves as the bridge with *Comizi d'Amore*, because she is the only woman in my project who was interviewed by Pasolini for his film; Terry Schiavo, an ex-TV hostess, and for me, the stereotypical ordinary girl who ends up "networkified"; and Marianne Faithfull, the wild rock icon, the woman famous for being censored. I thought it was terrific that Marianne, in her 50s, would allow herself to be courted on a reality show. Then I finish the program with Jeanne Moreau, a cinema icon known from films like *Querelle* [1982] and *La Baie des Anges* [1963].

GC: So these icons are courted, but you have arranged courtships that are in fact traps.

FV: Yes. For each actress there are three suitors, and the behavior of these suitors, good or bad, always represents a challenge, with the goal of creating a revealing moment. For example, for Antonella Lualdi there are three strippers; for Deneuve there are three presumably die-hard fans; for Terry Schiavo there are two heterosexual men and a lesbian; for Marianne Faithfull there are two young men and a transvestite. The actresses don't have the faintest idea who their

suitors will be, so their reactions are real.

GC: So while Pasolini was simply recording reactions, you are creating content for the reactions. For instance, you know that certain subjects—homosexuality, transvestism, etc.—can stimulate certain reactions. You construct these variants intentionally as well as the response of the audience. How did the reactions of Pasolini's public in 1965 compare with yours in 2004?

FV: What surprised me the most was seeing how very traditional patterns of conflict and debate were born inside this forum—the woman of a certain age defending classical femininity, the pseudo-intellectual guy defending sexual liberation, the classic Latin male attacking the whole problem without understanding it.

GC: So with respect to sexual relationships you don't see a change in the general public over the past 40 years?

FV: No, not with this project anyway. I concluded that if someone had conducted a comparison with 10 people in the time of Caesar, there probably would have been 10 opinions identical to the ones I encountered. I mean, in making this project I had to risk finding myself with a film full of ideas and moments that I don't agree with and that I wouldn't want to put my name to but that I'd have to accept since this is how things turned out. I never briefed anybody in the audience; I never told anyone to do this or that. It's all completely authentic.

GC: In Pasolini's film we see him asking questions. He sets the public apart from himself so there's no risk of his body or his feelings showing up in the film, but you put yourself in the audience. In doing so, you agree to follow the tradition of someone like Robert Mapplethorpe, who let himself be photographed in erotic moments, and even as he was dying. In other words you become a part of your own product.

FV: Yes. In fact, before filming began I asked myself, "Where do I put myself in the production—with the contestants, with the celebrities? Why am I here, what have I been doing on this project for 12 months?" And the answer was that I had been



a part of the audience; I had been watching these programs. So I knew that I needed to be there.

GC: In many of your films and videos you embroider. This latest installation includes a series of needlepoint works [*120 Sedute di Sodoma* (*120 Seats of Sodoma*)]. Can you talk a little about these?

FV: Well, I began by making needlepoint copies of prostitutes' calling cards that I found in telephone booths in London. Coming from an artistic Italian background, the idea was for me to perform a conceptual act, applying a visual, practical, openly domestic by-the-fireplace kind of language to a sexual one. Then I found that using this language of needlepoint unleashed very strong reactions from people. Some read it as a statement on sexuality or on the appropriation of a feminine language. Needlepoint is definitely an openly feminine language, but in some ways it's also a masculine one—when hunters come home they make needlepoints of the little ducks they've torn to pieces with bullets. So watching the reactions that this language would generate—a language that is figurative by nature—I understood (more Vezzoli page 64)

Opposite: Francesco Vezzoli with dancers from *Comizi di non-Amore* (*Non-Love Meetings*), 2004. Photo: Matthias Vriens. Above: Francesco Vezzoli's *The Life of Silvana Mangano* (*Teorema*), 1999, B/W laser prints on canvas with metallic embroidery, 33 x 43.5 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Fondazione Prada, Milano.

MORE ART REALITY SHOW



(continued from page 63) that, more than a painting or that kind of thing, this technique unleashed something in people. Then, to try to give this choice some depth, I tried to understand what its associations were. I discovered, for example, that among all the symbolic actresses of European and American cinema history, especially the ones with a truly supreme image like Greta Garbo, Silvana Mangano, and Joan Crawford—those who had constructed the most complicated, articulated, absolute image—all obsessively did needlepoint. They needed to somehow compensate for their double identity with a rather regenerative, reconciliatory practice. So needlepoint is also progressively performed in these videos, where I like to imagine myself as a fan, as a star fucker, who does embroiderings of the faces of the icons he loves, as well as the tears of pain on their faces.

GC: The other interesting thing is that you isolate them in this context of iconic portraiture and make them somewhat mannerist by creating them in the shape of ovals.

FV: Yes, I like the mannerist aspect, even in the choice of frames. I like to think that they should resemble those photographs you often see in restaurants, hung by the owners who are so happy to have had the actresses there.

GC: Why do you choose actresses who are marked by time?

FV: It seems to me that the cinematic language represented by these individuals has come to take on its own importance and identifications, and over time it has assumed a mythical value, not so much for artists as for other worlds that rely on imagery. For example, many fashion designers buy the rights to photos of people like Steve McQueen and Marilyn Monroe to advertise their products. It really surprises me because it means that these images, even homely, banal ones taken by unexceptional photographers, continue to be strong, imaginative vehicles.

Germano Celant is a consulting editor for *Interview*. Left: Stills from *Comizi di non-Amore (Non-Love Meetings)*, 2004. Photo: Matthias Vriens/courtesy of Fondazione Prada, Milano.