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ARTINFO

"I Am a Court Painter":

Francesco Vezzoli on His Celebrity-Crazed 24-Hour Paris Museum



Photo © Jason Schmidt

Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli

by Nicolai Hartvig, ARTINFO France

Tonight, the Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli is turning Paris's Palais de l'Élysée, a Modernist landmark designed by Auguste Perret, into a 24-hour museum of collaged celebrities, classic Greco-Roman statues, and a neon-splashed disco party, all in a décor provided by Rem Koolhaas's OMA side project AMO and sponsored by Prada. It will open at 9 p.m. Paris time with an exclusive dinner party that will last into the night, to be followed by a press conference, tours for schoolchildren, and then a public opening.

Somewhere between decadence and discourse, pretension and pondering, cash and culture, Vezzoli's project will question the art world's sources of beauty and museum freedom — as the champagne flows. The result will be either shrewd critique or a conceptual fail. And after 24 hours and a sweep-up, the Palais will return to its daily duties as the seat of France's Economic, Social, and Environmental Council.

BLOUIN ARTINFO caught up with Vezzoli as he was putting the finishing touches to the show.

Where did you get the idea for a 24-hour museum?

With Ms. Prada, we had long wanted to do something, but a real project, not just an exhibition — and it had to be a special occasion. Prada had an agreement with the Palais de l'Éna, so we decided to conceptualize a social ritual, or a baroque feast, turning it into an artwork. And I thought, wow, when will I ever get another chance to play with such a magnificent building? Artists are very greedy, not financially, but greedy for excellence. You have this monument to Modernism and all you want to do is bring in the people from Rem Koolhaas's studio and make a big crazy Brazilian tropicalia mess.

What are the key elements of the 24-hour Museum ? It has three sections: "Historic," "Contemporary," and "Forgotten."

It's a handy tripartition to simplify the project. The main element is the Grande Salle, which we've turned into something churchlike. It's almost 4,000 square meters and we've upholstered the whole room in perfumery pink neon, covered by metal netting, like Dan Flavin caged up by Bruce Nauman. We then installed sculptures that light up. I haven't seen the final results but the atmosphere should be one of a discotheque meeting the Louvre.

The Louvre itself has had some envelope-pushing performances in recent years, from artistic shadow boxers to interventions by contemporary artists, soon to include Wim Delvoye. But nothing has come close to what you're doing here.

Some will see it as institutional critique. We discussed this, internally, and said, "Let's not take ourselves too seriously." On this occasion, we feel that we are just playing a big game. It's like going to the Queen's house and putting on her whig, wearing her jewelry, but just for one night — and then putting everything back in place. Some people will be upset or think it kitsch. The only thing I don't want is to have the project seem elitist. I'm actually more curious about the reaction of the man on the street than that of the art and fashion worlds, where people know my language. I want a person, who is used to seeing the Palais de l'Éna in a certain way, to go inside and find this kind of pink Xanadu with Olivia Newton-John on rollerskates.

That speaks to the Facebook element of this project, where people can upload their own portraits into a gilded frame....

I will almost put more emphasis, intellectually, on the Web site. It's a provocation, of course: "Don't be fooled by the fact that I know some celebrities, that I use them as symbols of our time and put them into my moving portraits." But the key to the project is that it's for everybody — and the day after the party, everybody can come and look at the madness.

The exhibition puts the faces of celebrities on the bodies of classic Greco-Roman sculptures. How do you see the relationship, or the conversation, between the two?

It's an observation that has been growing in me. Recently, the Louvre loaned the Borghese collection to the Galleria Borghese, putting the pieces back where they were 500 years ago. Seeing them and comparing them to Canova's Pauline Borghese [the semi-nude neo-Classical sculpture known as the Venus Victrix], you realize how much these sculptures were charged with desire, lust, and passion. In such a serious collection, you find these aspects of beauty and sensuality, words almost unmentionable in contemporary art. We don't find these aspects, in any straightforward way, in contemporary art, but rather in cinema, in actresses, in advertising. This was the reason for the juxtaposition. But every one of the sculptures also wears a mask with my mother's eyes. I wanted to pay homage to her for inspiring, in me, a love for all women. In the end, when you're given such a big project, you need to return to your roots to feel secure. You're being swallowed by the power you've been given.

Was the 24-hour timeframe a conceptual decision?

Yes. It's the idea that we are recreating, in full, a social ritual: the opening, the dinner, the party, the press conference, the visit from the school, the opening to the public. Then we pull the red carpet from under everybody's feet, saying that it's just an illusion. There's also an interesting reference to Yves Klein's "Dimanche Version – Le Journal d'un Seul Jour," his newspaper that was sold in Paris kiosks for only one Sunday [November 27, 1960]. It was the first time he published images of "The Leap Into the Void." The concept is also similar to the trailer for a movie that doesn't exist or a campaign for an election that is not real. And in the end, 24 hours becomes a perfect metaphor for "l'Espace d'un Matin" [a quote from François de Malherbe's famous poem "Consolation à M. du Périer sur la mort de sa fille"].

You've been putting together the 24-hour museum in only 24 days.

One thing I like a lot about the fashion industry is its speed of ideas. And the art world is also being pushed into speed, which is something serious thinkers and critics will have to consider. When an industry, like the art industry, has taken up such a speed, it inevitably influences the nature of the artwork. In that sense, my art asks the question: Are we going too fast?

Visually, the show follows your practice of adopting celebrity images, manufactured fantasies, to create something out of your own imagination.

I take their power away, a little bit. Art is always a power struggle. Take royal paintings: in the 15th, 16th, or 17th century, the painter worked for the powers. What are the powers today? I am a court painter but my court is the media, or Hollywood. So I make works to deconstruct this. The most interesting court paintings are not the most beautiful ones, but those where you feel the painter is walking a fine line between the powers that allow him to work and the pleasure that he gets from his freedom to paint the

faces as they really appear, or to make them more distorted. It's always a mirror game. I hold up a mirror and try to reflect the world as it is, even if I like to do little twists sometimes and reality gets distorted. Or I show sides of things that normally are not very visible. I like to discuss the authority of things, with irony.

Critics will find parallels in the museum world, saying that you must follow certain unwritten rules and gain acceptance if you want a show. Your 24-hour museum throws together corporate sponsorship, collaged faces, néons, and a discotheque. Is this liberation?

Yes, I think it's a liberating gesture, and I like that word very much. But I don't want serious museums to be offended. They are home to people who spend their entire lives studying art history, providing us with the knowledge upon which we can play and destroy. My project has a bit of a punk attitude — but why not?

What's your favorite museum?

I really like the Galleria Borghese — with the Stendhal syndrome, how you are blown away when you are immersed — and also the Sir John Soane's Museum in London. I'm not trying to sound sophisticated. They take you into another dimension. It's like entering a movie set, and you feel much less the politics that exist to keep such an institution open. It's more depressing when I go to a museum and I see the book store, the gadget store, the sponsors, the donations. I understand that they are all necessary for the museum to exist, but I prefer to enter a place and forget who I am, like in a nightclub.