

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Francesco Vezzoli

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Self-portrait as Pope Innocent X (after Diego Velázquez) 2013

L'Uomo Vogue: Right from the beginning you chose awareness and control of front and backstage, structures and infrastructures, systems and their dynamics. And with great determination, not without paying dearly for your enterprising originality, you identified yourself in the image, and in the frame as well, concurrently assuming the roles of creator and viewer, curator of your own projects and exhibition installations. You have been the strategist of your own marketing and communication, not to mention promoter, producer and distributor of your work. And if this challenge to the system, exposing it and changing its rules is now widespread and rooted, it should be emphasized that you anticipated all of it in many ways. Where do your choices come from? And what are your feelings today about a contemporary art system that hasn't hesitated to squash and ridicule you, offering you recognition but also impeding you?

Francesco Vezzoli: "I have always been keenly aware from the outset that the system was in the process of transformation. Keep in mind that I moved to London to study in the early '90s, right when the *young British artists* phenomenon was exploding. At the time I didn't know much about art, mostly just what I'd learned from my parents -Arte Povera, Conceptual Art, a bit of Bauhaus. And this was the most serious and dedicated part of me. The stupid part was instead reading

newspapers on the Tube like the *London Evening Standard*. And faced with all those covers with artists as media stars, one naturally wondered “what’s going on here?”. I couldn’t remember Wolf Vostell or Mario Merz ever appearing on the cover of such publications... And it wasn’t a question of a stroke of genius, but that I simply found myself smack in the middle of a world that was changing, and it was happening right before everyone’s eyes. The first Art-Fashion Biennial, curated by Germano Celant, Ingrid Sischy and Franca Sozzani, represented another sign of change in that same period. It was easy to see that the international auction houses were no longer frequented by bookworms, but by people with huge egos, ambitious artworld pros on a personal quest for celebrity, creators of new vocabularies and criteria of communication. And the galleries were expanding – when I debuted in ’99 at Anthony d’Offay, he already had four locations in London. Later, other dealers followed suit, opening four, five, six showrooms around the world”.

L’U.V.: The system has changed progressively. The nomadic, militant profession of the curator has expanded across the board. Hundreds of modern and contemporary art fairs have sprung up. And the relationship between art and the audience has become increasingly superficial, compulsive and speculative.

F.V.: "The audience for art has changed. Today there is a more horizontal, wide-ranging knowledge, though not very refined. Museums have also become overgrown and therefore require huge numbers of visitors, so it’s clear that they have to draw upon a public that is less sophisticated and specialized than in the past. Consequently the conception of exhibitions becomes simplified”.

L’U.V.: You’re a contemplative artist who loves to think. Do you agree that there is a poverty of words and ideas in the current art scene?

F.V.: "It’s true, this is a time without thought, without places of real debate. There are instead places that must submit to the rules of the market, of advertising. Then there is the specialized niche market where extremely sophisticated debate continues, but it is incomprehensible to the majority. I don’t think I’ve embraced the system enough, perhaps because my family and my putative “parents” Ida Gianelli and Germano Celant, the first to provide me with a steady relationship with museums and foundations, have always kept me wary of the risks of the system. I obeyed and am glad I did, although it’s undeniably true that the system has evolved at a dizzying speed. The current level of nonchalance seems rather violent, and I don’t think there will be a return to order”.

L’U.V.: Which leads us to discuss your upcoming trilogy of museum shows. They inevitably must represent a synthesis for you. What do you think were the turning points in your excursus as an artist?

F.V.: "For me, turning points are human experiences. As for the rest, concerning my work and the choices I’ve made, I don’t want to theorize, nor give precise explanations, for it’s been a question of unconscious processes, natural consequences of my way of being. I believe I got a lot from the Gagosian Gallery. Being a part of that massive system revealed the future of art to me. This happened while witnessing the preparations for the big Piero Manzoni exhibition. I remember saying to myself, “Just watch, now Manzoni is going to have a big comeback”, and he did. Then there was the Lucio Fontana show and I immediately thought, “This might be the best Fontana exhibition of all time”, and it was. So, when you ask me about my most significant experiences, I refer you back to sitting on the London Tube absorbed in articles about Sarah Lucas and Damien

Hirst in the *Evening Standard*, and to joining Larry's gallery. Truly transformative experiences are violent. Like when you find a turd sitting on a Meissen china plate and you think, "What is this?", because it's the last thing you would expect".

L'U.V.: What do you think will be the model of the museum of the future?

F.V.: "The future of the museum is the theme of the work I'm doing now. Anna Mattiolo, in her introductory essay for my show at MAXXI in Rome, built a critical thesis on the gallery, an exhibition space originating in the 19th century which has since acquired a commercial valence. Not by accident, Anna read my exhibitions to date as ways of speaking to power. In fact I used the Guggenheim Museum in New York as an opera theater, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm as a modern theater without a stage and the Gagosian Gallery as a perfumery, or a church. What role do these institutions play? They are among the first to believe that culture enriches us, but we have serious problems with hospitals, so the museum takes the back seat, at least in Italy. I'm sure that museums in the rest of the world have lots of problems, with all the major collectors who tend to build their own public exhibition facilities. Museums are therefore obligated to rely on investments in communication and ticket sales. So the primary job of the various directors becomes that of making even the most sophisticated projects more easily legible".

L'U.V.: The simplification of content is a fact. But the propensity toward exceptionality inevitably persists and even grows stronger in the work of certain contemporary artists. You, for example, feel the need to work with authentic pieces of ancient sculpture. What are you aiming at?

F.V.: "I feel confused, so what do I do? I use a bust of Hadrian from the 1st century AD. It's a way of dislocating perception: I see works today worth 300,000 dollars, then I see a marble portrait of Hadrian, perhaps in bad condition, because statues deteriorated along with the fall or death of an emperor, which costs less than a contemporary print of dubious quality".

L'U.V.: You're a spectator and a reifier of unexpected artefacts.

F.V.: "The spectator has often been my role, yes. In my videos I'm mostly estranged from the action. I watch Iva Zanicchi singing. I watch Valentina Cortese shouting. I watch Marisa Berenson approach the altar, playing a timid, frightened groom, like "What am I doing here?". A bit as if it were a curse. Indeed, from Mario Praz forward, I've always wanted to associate myself with people who don't fit into the art world. I particularly like the moment when Gore Vidal, introducing the crazy "camp" part of my trailer for *Caligula*, utters the phrase, "Every moment in history is dark". Which means, I think, that the darkness of history never changes. Power remains inevitably and marvelously identical to itself, with its lackeys, jesters, prostitutes, advisors, court painters. The important thing, from Velázquez to Warhol to today, is to be aware of it, and to know how to deal with it".

L'U.V.: Tell us about your exhibition cycle *The Trinity* at MAXXI in Rome, PS1 in New York and MoCA in Los Angeles?

F.V.: "The idea came from talking with Klaus Biesenbach, who told me that "It's obvious your work moves between mediatic glamour, religion and art. You orbit these three spheres to investigate the power of magic, illusion and the commodification of dreams...". So we decided that Church, Cinema and Museum would be the subjects of three installations in different places, with a bio-bibliographic progression. Which is to say that my first videos were shot in Rome, then

I lived in New York, then pushed on as far as Los Angeles, to then return all the way home, to Milan – or metaphorically to Brescia, where I was born. They're three retrospectives that don't contain a single new piece. Everything I've produced till now will also be documented in three or four different books. Then I can leave everything behind, a bit like Beyoncé says in the new Pepsi ad: *Embrace your past, but live for now!*".

L'U.V.: In closing, I'm guessing that the portraits you made for these pages are emblematic of your upcoming shows.

F.V.: "The choice of the three works and the three artists is very precise. As for religion, comments are superfluous: the portrait of Pope Innocent X by Diego Velázquez (on the cover, ed.) is one of the most important paintings in history. And there's not much to add regarding its connection to power – just look at the attitude, the clothing, the sneer on his face. The portrait of Laurence Olivier by Salvador Dalí, my favorite painter, is for me a fetish object. When I recently visited the Vatican Museums, Antonio Paolucci introduced me to the rivalry between Raphael and Michelangelo. On the one hand, the frivolous, worldly Raphael, lover of fine clothes and beautiful women. On the other, the already elderly, cantankerous and avaricious Michelangelo. Needless to say, I immediately identified with Raphael".