

Flash Art

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NEWS



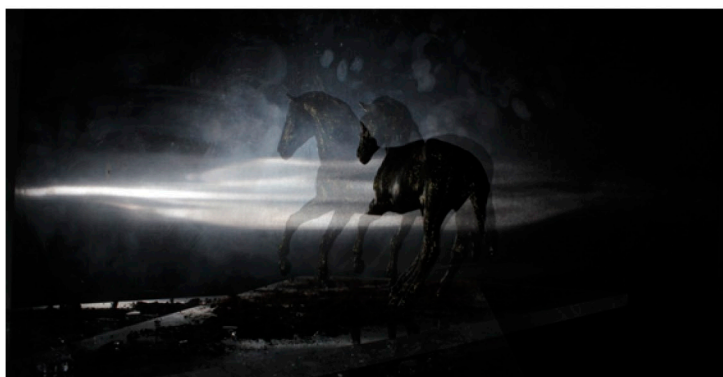
TIME-BASED MEDIA

LA DOLCE VITA?

Aimee Walleston

"It's so depressing to see the art world unconsciously behave like a secondary entertainment industry." This comment by Italian Francesco Vezzoli, whose starlet-strewn filmic arch-narratives arguably compose an exaltation of Hollywood eternal (including a recent quasi-retelling of *La Dolce Vita* starring Eva Mendes), opens up an intriguing new discourse on contemporary art video made in the tendency of mainstream cinema and television. As one finds a progressive confluence and collapse between artists and film directors, notably with the recent creative output of Miranda July, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Steve McQueen, the distinction between art and entertainment becomes in some contexts illusory, and in others a precise delineation between the ethical and economic structures of art-making and feature filmmaking.

New York artist Tommy Hartung creates videos with a deeply cinematic presence, yet equally possessed of the artist's bone-deep discomfort with the corporate hierarchy endemic to feature filmmaking. His stop-motion animation videos, wherein puppets are used as characters, are typically presented in a darkened gallery, where their atmospheric soundtracks and contemplative languor whip up an air of movie magic. *The Ascent of Man* was featured in PS1's "Greater New York" and will travel to Rotterdam's film festival next year. His newest work, *Anna*, based in part on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, will show at New York's "On Stellar Rays" this fall. Each work was made entirely by the artist, with no outside assistance. "Working without a crew, or a producer, allows me to be disengaged from power dynamics, which I have never liked or understood," explains Hartung, who also shies away from the idea of becoming his own actor. "If I were to point the camera at myself, it would become about me being some sort of celebrity,



Above: TOMMY HARTUNG, *Anna*, 2011. HD Video. Below: FRANCESCO VEZZOLI, *La Nuova Dolce Vita*, 2011.

drawing attention to myself. I don't want what I do to be about 'Tommy — what's he going to do next?' A lot of my work is actually about evading this."

And a lot of Vezzoli's work is about diving into this. While professing a discomfort in doing so, Vezzoli often performs in his films, and perhaps more than any other contemporary artist has truly delved into the mires of the corporate Hollywood beast. His impetus toward this realm was, in part, to distinguish his work from the look of avant-garde video art. "Because all the other video artists I respected were doing arty films at the time [I started], I felt a real challenge to engage with the real source of fascination in my work: famous actors and great directors." His experience within Hollywood, however, has left him less than converted to the charms of its Byzantine pecking order. "Dealing with the corporate structures, agents and publicists especially, related to the talent has proved truly pain-

ful and wounding," says Vezzoli. "[It's] the worst aspect of my projects. I preferred never to really direct my videos, as I had to use all my energy to secure the presence of the talent," which includes Hollywood actresses Natalie Portman and Michelle Williams for the artist's 2009 fake fragrance commercial *Greed*. Exhausted by his celeb-wrangling efforts, says Vezzoli, he "let the artwork direct itself, allowing the crew to do their job and their performance in total freedom, like a camp version of Situationism."

To complement art video and film that wasn't made for cinema, but feels right when exhibited in a cinematic tradition, in 2008 Ed Halter and Thomas Beard created Light Industry, an exhibition space devoted to screening art films and video in a theater setting. "We see ourselves as continuing a long line of intrepid cinema exhibitors that stretches back to the 1920s. For us, Light Industry is an extension of this tradition into the 21st century, exploring what cinema

as an art form can be in the digital age," says Halter. Following suit, 2009 marked the creation of Migrating Forms, an annual New York film festival programmed by Kevin McGarry and Nellie Killian that developed out of the New York Underground Film Festival. "Many large film festivals develop specialized sidebars for experimental work, which unnecessarily silo programming," explains McGarry. "And many smaller experimental festivals exclude certain works that fall into the cinema end of the spectrum. What we are doing is straightforward: we're showing everything together."

While these venues offer a more extensive look at what is being produced in contemporary art and cinema, they still address a far smaller audience than the latest blockbuster. Film and video artists working outside the economic structure of Hollywood have freedom to do what they want to do, but necessary limitations as to what type of audience gets to experience it. Hartung's work, for one, will not be coming soon to a theater near you. "I don't think the top-down corporate structure inherent to cinema is good at using people with more unique perspectives on the world," says the artist. "What would it mean to be a typical filmmaker? Then I'd have a little corporation, and I'd have to do team building exercises on the weekends? I don't want to do that." Vezzoli, however, is still intent in his balance of exaltation and critique of mass market by engaging with an audience far beyond the typical gallerygoer. He describes a new dream project: "I'd like to stage a five-minute Greek tragedy at the intermission of a football grand finale, like the Super Bowl, or something of equal social impact," says Vezzoli. "Alternatively, I'd love to direct the Oscars."



Flash Art's Time-Based Media column explores the intersection of art and the moving image in the 21st century.