Slate | The Rise of Celebrity Art

James Franco is hard to escape these days, but the art world has a particularly serious case of Franco-philia. By now, the offbeat heartthrob has had his multisided creative endeavors profiled at epic length in *New York* magazine and had his wacky installation art reviewed in the *New York Times*. The L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art, under the new, celebrity-friendly leadership of former NYC superdealer Jeffrey Deitch, made a splash by hosting "SOAP at MOCA," a performance-art piece starring the actor. (Confusingly, the project was both an art piece conceived by the actor-cum-artist and filmed as something produced by "Franco," the demented artist character he had been playing on the soap *General Hospital* for a year.) Franco's ubiquity has become a kind of running joke: Young artist Nic Rad recently declared him "the greatest artist of this generation, if not of all time." A widely circulated art-world April Fool's prank had the actor representing the United States at next year's Venice Biennale.

SOAP AT MOCA, James Franco on *General Hospital*, with artist Mark Bradford, June 24, 2010, MOCA Pacific Design Center. Photograph by Stefanie Keenan/Wireimage.

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James Franco's surging fine-art cred isn't just a freak occurrence; it represents a more widespread mutation in contemporary art. Back in 2008, New York artist Carter presented a work with the actor, filmed at Yvon Lambert gallery in Paris. The project involved Franco reperforming dialogue from a variety of his film roles (with a few other random references thrown in, as well). Taken out of context, the Hollywood dialogue became a kind of elliptical, Beckett-esque text. The work's title, *Erased James Franco*, is a tribute to Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, in which Rauschenberg took a drawing by modernist hero Willem de Kooning, erased it, and presented it anew as his own work. That knowing reference might provide a key to a slew of recent art projects that involve collaborations with celebrities—a trend we might call "celebreadymade" art.

Film still from *Erased James Franco*, 2008, 16mm film, directed by Carter © Carter. Image Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

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Readymade is the term attached to an art strategy pioneered by Marcel Duchamp almost 100 years ago, when he plonked a urinal down on a plinth at the 1913 Armory Show and called it sculpture. Instead of making new things, the game became about recontextualizing found, "readymade" things.

As for the other half of the neologism, the unholy alliance of art and celebrity is nothing new. Andy Warhol's "screen tests"—affectless, slow-mo, black-and-white film clips of celebs and wannabe celebs who stopped by his Factory (recently on view at the Seattle Art Museum)—are a potent precedent for neo-Pop meditations on fame like *Erased James Franco*. Warhol was playing around on the edges of experimental film, but also playing with the form of the Hollywood audition tape. Today's artists take Warhol's affection for the tropes of celebrity culture to its logical conclusion, using famous people themselves as found objects. Seriously.

Edie Sedgwick, 1965, Screen Test: 16mm, black and white, silent 4.5 minutes at 16fps (frames per second) © the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, New York, 2009.

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Richard Prince is well-known for his application of the "readymade" idea to advertising imagery, appropriating Marlboro ads, minus the captions, and recycling them as his own art. In 1983, Prince rephotographed a controversial picture of a seminude, prepubescent Brooke Shields, presenting the unsavory image in a gold frame and titling it *Spiritual America*, as if to ask, "What does it say about us that this image exists?" Both reflecting on and redoubling the exploitation of the child actress, the image has proved difficult to show without controversy—so in 2005, Prince teamed up with the now-mature Shields, commissioning the glamour photographer Sante d'Orazio to take a new portrait of her, this time with her very much in charge (or at least game), posed as a bikini-clad pin-up astride a Harley, in a lurid cloud of steam. In this case, the actress' willing collaboration is the point, and part of what you see when you look at the image. Currently, that work appears in the National Gallery of Canada's "Pop Life" extravaganza, a show about the vogue for artists who view branding and PR as integral to their practice.

Richard Prince, *Spiritual America 4*, 2005. Ektacolor photograph. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery © Richard Prince.

The "Pop Life" show provides more than one touchstone for the "celebreadymade" idea. Takashi Murakami, an artist routinely called the "Japanese Warhol," is known for his superslick sculptures and paintings recreating anime imagery. For "Pop Life," he teamed up with *Charlie's Angels* director McG to film a video of Kirsten Dunst (James Franco's *Spider-Man* co-star, no less!) cavorting around Tokyo's geek-Mecca Akihabara neighborhood in a blue wig, tutu, tights, and parasol, lip-synching an energetic cover of The Vapors' 1980 hit *Turning Japanese*.

"It seems like a disposable music video, but then you look closer and realize that it is born out of something decidedly more complicated," McG told the *Wall Street Journal*. In fact, the main "complicated" thing about the artwork is that the closer you look, the more it looks *exactly like* an actual music video starring Dunst. Warhol-style quotation of pop culture has become so faithful to its source that it is no longer really a quotation.

Takashi Murakami, production still of *Akihabara Majokko Princess*, film starring Kirsten Dunst © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., 2009. All Rights Reserved. Photograph by Bruce Yamakawa.

Speaking of *Charlie's Angels* ... Another key work in the "celebreadymade" constellation would be Keith Edmier's 2000 collaboration with the late Farrah Fawcett. Edmier, so the tale goes, approached the actress—a boyhood crush—who, at the time, had a noted sideline as an artist, and pitched a little creative dialogue. The results included a series of photos of the two together, but also sculptural portraits in bronze and marble—the actress's of the artist, and the artist's of the actress. They are recycled Rodin, not particularly cutting-edge. But the lowbrow results are part of the point, suggesting the lowbrow world of mass culture, popular taste, and icon worship.

That last point is key: It helps illuminate how such gestures are justified by the fine-art cognoscenti. Often enough, the boilerplate language is that they "critique the distinction between high and low art." Essentially, they're saying that contemporary art is often so abstruse and insular—and so unaware that this is a problem—that playing up a kind of pop-culture populism can be mistaken for a serious critique of the institution of art.

Keith Edmier and Farrah Fawcett, *The Space Between You and Me*, 2000-01, Digital Cibachrome, 7.5 x 10.75 inches, Edition 2/50. Produced by Art Production Fund, courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery.

The amusing thing about such a line of thought is that blame for the obscurity of conceptual art traditionally gets laid at the feet of ... Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's success gave artists license to explore the more esoteric realms of ideas-as-art. The "celebreadymade" phenomenon, on the other hand, implicitly connects Duchamp's conceptual gesture—"this thing is art because I say it is"—to the phenomenon whereby the touch of a celebrity can bestow cult fascination on an ordinary object. Like, say, J.D. Salinger's toilet, recently on sale on eBay.

Such, at least, would seem to be the meaning of something like Rob Pruitt's recent "Signature Series" for New York's Gavin Brown Gallery, which supposedly involved getting a variety of celebrities to autograph large unprimed canvasses. Pruitt displayed the resulting signatures salon-style, and unedited, as his own artwork. The series was promoted via a video clip of Pruitt getting Courtney Love to sign a canvas, the two kissing airily as she dashes off her contribution.

Karl Lagerfeld poses with Rob Pruitt's "Signature Series" at Gavin Brown Gallery, during Art Basel 2009. Photograph by David Velasco. Courtesy Artforum Diary.

Last October, Pruitt staged an art event for the Guggenheim Museum, dubbed the "First Annual Rob Pruitt Art Awards." The well-promoted "performance" was essentially an Oscars-style bash for art-world players, complete with a red carpet and categories like "artist of the year" and "museum show of the year." The stunt was most notable in that no one who participated seemed quite certain how seriously to take it—it was, after all, a real fundraiser for the Guggenheim, and it was really sponsored by Calvin Klein. (Word is that the "Art Awards" will return this year, incidentally.) Real trophies designed by Pruitt were given for the winners in each category; in the spirit of the "readymade," these consisted of a champagne bottle, topped with a light bulb, in a bucket of plastic ice. A special trophy was presented to Cynthia "Plaster Caster," the groupie/"artist" famous for casting the penises of rock stars like Jimi Hendrix. And a smattering of actual celebrities handed out the awards, including Kylie Minogue, Julianne Moore and —drum roll, please—James Franco.

Ryan Trecartin accepting the Art Award for "new artist of the year" from presenters Julianne Moore and Francisco Costa at *Rob Pruitt Presents: The First Annual Art Awards* at the Guggenheim Museum. Photograph by Bill Farrell/Patrick McMullan.

The above artists make use of the "celebreadymade" as one weapon in their arsenal of attention-grabbing antics. But the trend does have its Michelangelo, the man who incarnates its full, unfurled potential: Francesco Vezzoli.

The Italian artist has become well-known in recent years for spinning art out of his ability to persuade famous people to participate in some arty self-parody (or is it self-promotion?). He's staged a production of Pirandello with Cate Blanchett at the Guggenheim; cast Sharon Stone in a satire of a political ad; wrangled Benicio Del Toro, Courtney Love, and Helen Mirren into appearing in a promo for a nonexistent film version of *Caligula* (togas by Donatella Versace). At Gagosian Gallery's Rome branch last year, Vezzoli conjured an entire fake media program to promote a fragrance called Greed, including a slick, Roman Polanski-directed commercial, with actresses Natalie Portman and Michelle Williams engaged in a swanky catfight. Naturally, the design for Vezzoli's perfume bottle was a riff on a 1921 work by Marcel Duchamp, which involved Duchamp putting his own portrait on a bottle of perfume.

Francesco Vezzoli, *Greed, The Perfume That Doesn't Exist*, 2009 © Francesco Vezzoli. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Vezzoli's masterpiece to date, however, came in the form of a collaboration with the ubiquitous pop phenomenon Lady Gaga, staged as a fundraiser for the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art last November. The performance saw the Italian maestro marshal a tremendous constellation of high-end props into one unspeakable *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Gaga at a piano decorated by art star Damien Hirst, wearing a hat designed by starchitect Frank Gehry, performing her ballad "Speechless," as dancers from the Bolshoi Ballet went through some dreamy gyrations on a runway. The comely Vezzoli sat near the pop star onstage, both wearing carnival masks designed by the film director Baz Luhrmann, of *Moulin Rouge!* fame.

So: Is this a brilliant new way to pierce the pretensions of the art world—or just star-fucking raised to sublime dimensions? Vezzoli gets the last word. He explained his intention with the L.A. MoCA show thusly: "My wish is that the entertainment industry makes love more often with the art industry." How healthy such a relationship might be, I don't know, but given the success of his "celebreadymades," Vezzoli seems likely to get his wish.

Performance still of Francesco Vezzoli's *The Shortest Musical You Will Never See Again*, 2009. Commissioned by MoCA L.A. for their gala. Photograph courtesy Wireimage.