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Palazzo Strozzi Inaugurates New Centre for Contemporary Culture with the Exhibition *Emotional Systems*

The **Centre for Contemporary Culture la Strozina (CCCS)** opened to the public on **30 November 2007** with the exhibition, *Emotional Systems*. This new space at the Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, has been created as a platform for the vast range of practices that characterise contemporary art and culture.

James Bradburne, Director General of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, said: "The Centre for Contemporary Culture la Strozina (CCCS) aims to be an open platform for the vast array of approaches that shape contemporary culture. Open in the sense that the intent is not just to develop one single interpretation but to stimulate critical debate and a far-ranging discussion of the multiple layers that make up the complex and at times apparently contradictory reality in which we live."

The inaugural exhibition, *Emotional Systems - Contemporary Art between Emotion and Reason*, on view from **30 November 2007 to 3 February 2008**, will investigate the topic of emotions. It proposes a reinterpretation of the correlation between the contemporary artist, the work of art and the user, in light of recent discoveries in the neurological sciences about the human brain and its effects on the emotions. Curated by **Franziska Nori** and **Martin Steinhoff**, the exhibition presents works by contemporary artists who engage in different ways, and some more explicitly than others, with not only the corporal and sensorial but also rational and cognitive aspects of the experience of emotions, both in creating the works and in perceiving them.

Emotional Systems will comprise three clearly distinct yet complementary phases: an **exhibition**, a **publication** and a **programme of lectures** designed to investigate the topic of emotions. The artists invited to take part in the exhibition are **Bill Viola** (USA), **William Kentridge** (South Africa), **Yves Netzhammer** (Switzerland), **Katharina Grosse** (Germany), **Christian Nold** (Great Britain), **Maurice Benayoun** (France), **Teresa Margolles** (Mexico), **Andrea Ferrara alias Ongakuaw** (Italy) and the poets **Elisa Biagini**, **Antonella Anedda** and **Valerio Magrelli**. The participating artists all work with different media. They have been chosen for the different ways in which their works emotionally affect the public, a process in which empathy often plays a significant role. Visitors will find themselves being involved at sensorial, cognitive and emotional levels as they experience the multimedia installations, videos, digital animations, monumental paintings and other visual, audio and corporal stimuli.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue, published in English and Italian by Silvana Editoriale, with essays by the curators, **Franziska Nori** and **Martin Steinhoff**, and contributions and excerpts from specialised publications by internationally renowned scholars, including the neurologists and neurological scientists **Antonio Damasio** and **Joseph LeDoux**, philosophers and anthropologists **Ronald De Sousa**, **Peter Goldie**, **Martha Nussbaum** and **William Reddy** and the art historian, **David Freedberg**. The theme explored in their interdisciplinary comparison is the rationality of emotions and, in Freedberg's words, the "relations between the formal aspects of an image and the emotional responses" of the user.

An **art education programme** has been especially created for the project by **Barbara Campaner**, to enable visitors to interact with the various different works and explore the exhibition's themes. **Lectures** will develop the exhibition's theme from a multidisciplinary and scientific standpoint, achieved in direct encounters between Italian academics and experts from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Thursday evenings will be dedicated to psychologists, philosophers and anthropologists who will present their theories, while Fridays are earmarked for poetry readings and musical performances. The programme involves researchers such as **Giovanni Lucignani**, **Andrea Pinotti**, **Emilia Barile** and **Luigi Pagliarini**, while the poets include **Elisa Biagini**, **Antonella Anedda** and **Valerio Magrelli**.

The CCCS space is located in the recently restored rooms under the magnificent inner courtyard in Palazzo Strozzi known as *la Strozzina*. These spaces formerly housed the cellars of the Palazzo, a veritable jewel of the Italian Renaissance. From the end of the Second World War until the great flood in 1966, these rooms hosted the most important exhibitions held in Florence. The new centre has eleven rooms of varying sizes, with a total floor area of 850 square metres.

The CCCS will present a programme that features not only thematic exhibitions but also regular installations by independent curators and film and video cycles, workshops, performances and lectures. "The CCCS is a place for contemporary culture," stresses **Franziska Nori**, the new centre's Project Director, "where projects will tackle aspects of town planning, economics, social and political development, the sciences, technology as well as aesthetics and ethics, as contemporary art itself has already broken free of the individual disciplinary approach. The programme thus developed will enable visitors to experience and examine both the heterogeneity of contemporary art and a range of different curatorial and interpretive standpoints."

Notes to Editors

The Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is a public/private institution founded by the City of Florence, the Province of Florence, the Florentine Chamber of Commerce, the CR Bank of Florence and the Association of Private Partners of Palazzo Strozzi.

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Palazzo Strozzi, Piazza Strozzi, 50123 Firenze (Florence), Italy

Information: Tel. +39 055 264 5155, www.palazzostrozzi.org and
www.strozzina.it

Opening hours: Daily 11.00 to 20.30. Closed Mondays

Admission: € 5.00 multiple entry (up to five times in one month, including lectures)
€ 4.00 schools (up to five times in one month)
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Emotional Systems - Contemporary Art between Emotion and Reason

30 November 2007 to 3 February 2008

The inaugural exhibition of the **Centre for Contemporary Culture la Strozzi (CCCS)**, ***Emotional Systems - Contemporary Art between Emotion and Reason***, has been curated by Franziska Nori, Project Director of CCCS, and Martin Steinhoff, phenomenologist and expert in the field. It occupies the eleven rooms, which comprise 850 m², under the courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. Each room is devoted to one artist, each focusing on different approaches to the theme of the exhibition.

The first room shows two videos by the South African artist **William Kentridge**, who uses narrative, graphic gestures and music to create a particular sense of emotional togetherness. His stories, set in South Africa under apartheid, all have the same themes and symbolic elements, such as death, existential solitude, love and the greatness of nature. Although they spring from the artist's poetic imagery and personality, they are perfectly at home as part of a collective understanding, and of a set of universal emotional values.

Visitors will then encounter the meditative, intimate dimension of poetry in a room featuring the written and "spoken" actions of three Italian poets, **Antonella Anedda**, **Elisa Biagini** and **Valerio Magrelli**, who aim to make poetry more accessible. They wish poetry to be experienced and enjoyed as a fundamental medium for "conducting an emotional charge", one that can be relied on when emotions overwhelm our lives.

Completing the intimate, meditative perception of emotion, with a more cognitive, ponderous approach, is the work of **Maurice Benayoun**, a new-media artist based in Paris, who conducts research into the correlations between emotions and network logic. In *Mechanics of Emotions*, the artist monitors the thousands of queries fed into search engines by users. Custom-developed software then enables him to cross-reference the data and its geographical provenance (cities, countries and continents) against terms that define the users' emotional status in real time. These emotions are then plotted on a 3D global map with such terms as "glad", "sad", "nervous" or "satisfied". This is one of three pieces by Benayoun being exhibited in *Emotional Systems*, based on an interpretation of the web and a metaphorical 'organ'. The Internet is seen as the digital community's nervous system, a cultural filter system that enables us to see atmospheres and emotions.

The sensation generated between the work of art and the observer may also be one of disorientation, uncertainty and ambiguity, as in the case of the Mexican artist **Teresa Margolles**, whose work *Aire* occupies the empty, antiseptic whiteness of the

next room. A small caption describes the material used in this installation: an air conditioner and steam from water taken from the laboratories in the municipal mortuary in Mexico City after it was used to wash unidentified corpses being prepared for autopsy. As the visitor becomes aware of this fact, the awareness itself becomes an integral part of the artistic process. The result is that Margolles raises visitors to the status of actors who complete her installation with their imagination and their ability to visualise intimately, creating an emotional response of repulsion and disgust that is neither visual nor immediate but sensorial and cognitive.

In complete contrast the adjacent room is dark and mysterious. It features the evocative video installation *Observance* by **Bill Viola**. As in previous works, the American artist choreographs people to act out scenes of classical Christian iconography. The figures are extrapolated from their religious symbolism and re-contextualised in a timeless, universally poetic dimension, as a metaphor of the essence of the human condition. The work's theme, or virtual object, is the physical expression of pain. Viola shows all the action in slow motion, so that the audience is drawn into the character's gestures and mimic expressiveness. In neuro-scientific terms, Viola's work is a perfect case of seeking audience participation (empathy) through the visual impact and activation of mirror neurons.

Traditionally related to painting, especially since the rise of abstract art, colour often provokes a vigorous emotional reaction. To express this chromatic energy and emotional value, the curators invited **Katharina Grosse** to create a piece especially for *Emotional Systems*. This German artist interacts with the specific architectural space and forges a direct bond with the environment where she prepares her work. Her spatial vision, her particular form of corporal involvement and her experience of reality are translated into colour, using the immediate, impulsive medium of spray paint. The sense of movement she instils in her enormous fields of colour comes from the absence of all closed, specific form and from their dissolving outlines. As a result, her creative energies can behave unexpectedly and uncontrollably, making the observer giddy.

The work of the Swiss artist **Yves Netzhammer** involves digitally animating humans and animals in 3D video sequences that arouse emotions by telling stories. In the numerous short sequences that make up the work *The Subjectivisation of Repetition*, the artist has generated some incredibly sad hominids, making them extremely human, despite their abstract body forms, then caused them to move in a setting made of primary shapes and colours that are immediately identifiable with real situations. New shapes are generated from one another until they bring about a new world that triggers a sense of reflection and empathy in the observer. We can all penetrate this new digital and prevalently symbolic reality in search of something of ourselves, of our limitations and of the fragile, vulnerable condition of the human being.

The English artist **Christian Nold**, a lecturer at Plymouth University, has created *Emotional Mapping*, a research project pieced together over several years based on public participation and advanced technologies. Nold has developed a device that detects skin tension and perspiration, which is rigged up to a GPS (global positioning system). This device is supplied to a substantial number of people, who wear it while going about their everyday lives.

Dubbed a galvanic skin response sensor, the device records the wearers' physical reactions generated by emotional sensations as they follow a given route. Once they have completed it, the data is transferred to a computer and then plotted on a Google Earth map. The artistic product comes about as a result of the contents generated by the participants themselves (user-generated content). The project's driving principle is to personalise artistic experiences and make art out of the individual's emotions by mapping them. This process of visual materialisation leads individual emotions to crystallise into an image that in turn acquires the value of a collective identity. For *Emotional Systems*, the artist has worked with the local artistic community, running a workshop in November 2007 and creating a new "emotional map" of Florence.

The final work in the exhibition is *Nomadic Time*, an interactive multimedia installation created by the Italian composer **Andrea Ferrara alias Ongakuaw**. This installation involves the connecting of an individual (the performer) to a machine that detects his or her brainwaves. They are then put inside a cage like a guinea pig, where they watch a video sequence of 257 still shots of a tree by the river Arno, photographed by the artist in the course of the year. The number of these shots corresponds to the number of days that Ferrara was actually on the spot to photograph the tree. The days when he could not make it are marked by white signs on a black background, which flash onto the screen for a fraction of a second. This absence is also represented by the absence of the performer in the moments when the performance is suspended, leaving just the objects in an empty cage. The performer's emotional response, in the shape of brainwaves, will be recorded, codified and digitally sampled by a computer. This codification is used to translate an algorithmic compositional strategy into acoustic data; a software program custom-written by the artist turns the recorded waves into musical sounds. The resulting sound will constitute a real-time mapping of the emotions being experienced by the performer. The sound will be broadcast in the performance space, generating a transference between the performer's visual and audio emotions, with which visitors will be able to interact in turn in the days following the original action.

Emotional Systems

Franziska Nori

Contemporary artists have constantly broadened their cultural activities over the last few decades and extended them to all the social spheres. The classical idea of the institution as a privileged framework for art has been called into question, deconstructed, challenged and sometimes denied. Artists today work with a greater openness to the artistic role as customarily conceived. They move freely over a whole range of roles including artist, curator, magazine publisher, designer, architect, entrepreneur, documentary maker, programmer, administrator of Internet communications platforms and even political activist. They create their own local networks and move at the same time within the structures of a globalised world, generating both critical contexts with respect to the art system and autonomous spaces of participation and communication. The means of production are no longer restricted to drawing, painting, sculpture, photography and video; the field of artistic experimentation has expanded to encompass all the elements that form part of everyday life, including the Internet, software, video games and cellular telephones.

The basic approach of the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi (hereafter CCCS) is to develop a multiyear programme which harnesses both local and international networks. This means not only developing thematic exhibitions to be held during the year but also inviting independent curators and institutions to propose exhibitions, series of videos and films, workshops, performances and lectures to be hosted at the centre on a regular basis. The programme will enable visitors to experience and examine both the heterogeneity of contemporary art and a wide range of different curatorial and interpretative standpoints.

Art today reacts in accordance with the principles of the society generating it. It is developed as a constant verification of everyday life and reality, which now appears to be far more obviously complex and fragmented than ever in the past. The arts have thus come to act increasingly in a context where reality and make-believe overlap and, as a result, the reading of contemporary art appears less immediate. Above all, it is no longer based on codes and values comprehensible to the community as a whole, as was the case with the art of pre-modern societies, and hence no longer lends itself to univocal interpretation.

Artists now appear to focus on invading everyday life, challenging the elements that make up its social fabric, and probing the different realities in an effort to bring about a change in parameters and in habits. 'Beauty' (as a category) no longer aspires to be a purely aesthetic phenomenon but extends to the dimension of lived experience, in which a central role is sought by conscious action, an action that finds its source in critical sensitivity with respect to the surrounding world and is hence transformed into an ethical stance and a new political awareness.

This paradigm shift is reflected not only in the themes addressed by contemporary artists but also in their formal and aesthetic choices, which take new directions and open up new fields of experimentation, freeing them both from the disciplinary constraints laid down by tradition and from the idea of the work as a finished product.

Lars Blunck speaks in *Between Object and Event* about the harnessing of empirical potential, thereby seeking to define a form of artistic production that becomes performance (in the theatrical sense of the term) and is generated in the very moment of action. Including installations, events, psychophysical provocation and the socio-political construction of situations in this context, it challenges the classical idea of the work of art along with the assumptions of the contemporary world.

This does not mean, however, that we can no longer speak about the 'work of art' (in the sense of something finished that performs its function in being contemplated) in the sphere of contemporary art. It refers instead to the fact that it is difficult to find clear-cut typological definitions for contemporary art that are compatible with the traditional classification of artworks by genre.

The art produced today refuses to act within a set framework and seeks constant renewal through new trends and developments.

In transforming and differentiating what proves to be known and familiar, contemporary art goes back to its roots in the avant-garde movements of the early decades of the twentieth century, which brought artistic praxis into everyday life and thus opened up the path leading to the present day.

The first project presented in the spaces of CCCS is *Emotional Systems- contemporary art between emotion and reason*.

Emotional Systems is developed within an interdisciplinary relational sphere peculiar to and typical of the contemporary world. The project addresses the theme of the emotions, which offers both immediate appeal for a public accustomed to thinking of art as sensorially enticing and involving aesthetic experience, and an opportunity to demonstrate the integration of contemporary theories developed in the humanistic area as well as the scientific.

Unlike the historicised theories and practices of art, that have already been given a very exact location in the cultural context, contemporaneity draws sustenance from heterogeneous stimuli that generate multiple forms of creative production and make interpretation both complex and particularly vital.

Throughout western history, philosophers and scientists have constantly developed new theories regarding the definition of rational thought and emotion in human beings. The ancient Greeks saw reason and the emotions as locked in an eternal struggle for supremacy over the human psyche. Scientists focused increasingly on rationality and cognition during the early years of the twentieth century, paying practically no attention to the influence of the Emotional Systems sphere. Examples include the behaviourists, whose work was concerned exclusively with externally visible and measurable attitudes. The later widespread practice of likening the brain to a computer then led to the theoretical concept of functionalism.

Over the last few years, however, there has been a growing tendency in many scientific disciplines to see the emotions as a key factor for rational action in both human and animal behaviour. Various definitions and models regarding the emotions are currently under discussion in the scientific literature, albeit with the use of terminology that is not always uniform and sometimes gives rise to the need for basic clarification. There is as yet no general agreement about how the primary mechanisms triggering the various emotions can be influenced, how they are to be classified and whether categorical descriptions can be applied.

New scientific discoveries have, however, always worked in the evolution of western culture to produce a paradigm shift for society as a whole by broadening and challenging the worldview of an entire age. Discoveries such as the theory of relativity had direct effects on philosophical and artistic thinking as well as indirect consequences on the lifestyle and morality of twentieth-century society. At the same time, the constant development of research methods and new technologies has played a crucial role in the attainment of new knowledge. For example, scientists are now able to observe cerebral activity in living subjects, something that was impossible a few years ago. Image-based diagnostic systems such as computer-aided tomography and magnetic resonance have finally enabled neuroscientists and neuro-physiologists to study mental and neuronal functions in concomitance with psychical activities. These technologies have provided visual results that broaden the horizons of knowledge and open up a series of new questions that are now the subject of intense debate in the various disciplines. The recent discovery of the close correlation between chemical processes taking place in the brain and repercussions on the actions of the individual concerned, for example, have given rise to discussion about the possible relativity of the concepts of morality and creativity. The idea of individual self-determination has been shaken at the root, thus triggering new interpretations also in the sphere of civil and penal law. The concept of creativity linked to the individual genius is called into question by new discoveries indicating a close connection between exceptional abilities and the production of dopamine in the brain.

In the light of the above, the challenge is to channel the knowledge and the concepts discussed in

the different scientific disciplines into a discourse of broader cultural relevance and, in a certain sense, a humanistic-Renaissance tradition that has been abandoned in favour of sharp division into specialised disciplines since the eighteenth century.

The new digital technologies have long since been included among the tools of creative expression and cognitive analysis adopted by artists for non-scientific purposes in pursuit of philosophical, aesthetic and more strictly visual aims. The reflections developed in the world of art can, however, lead at times to a rethinking of science or deeper consideration of the use of a series of tools. Dialogue is thus already underway between art and science just as it is between methods and means or the scientific approach and historical or social analysis linked to the human sciences.

The neuroscientific debate developed on the relationship between the appearance of images and the types of reaction they trigger is currently arousing ever-greater interest in the humanistic field.

‘The emotions were excluded from the history and the philosophy of art for most of the twentieth century The three tendencies that dominated the history of twentieth-century art ended up being formalism, connoisseurship and studies of the different kinds of context in which the work was produced. They all exclude the emotions. ... It was not until the work of neuroscientists like Giacomo Rizzolatti and his group in Parma, Joseph LeDoux and Antonio Damasio that some confirmation was obtained that we are on the right track. ... It appears more legitimate today than ever before to investigate the relations between the formal aspects of an image and the Emotional Systems responses.’ (David Freedberg in *Immagini della Mente. Neuroscienze, arte, filosofia*, Raffaello Cortina Editore)

The challenge addressed by the *Emotional Systems* project is to attempt a critical rereading of the correlation between artist, artwork and viewer in the light of the most recent discoveries about the human brain and the emotions. The selection of authors featured in the catalogue and the theses they put forward is intended to prompt a different or perhaps new way of looking at what it is that generates experience and the quality of that experience in the encounter between viewer and work of art.

While we can only perceive the things represented by art as an experience at one remove, empathy enables us to establish a relationship with them that can also cause us to contemplate our own existence and thus become, in a certain sense, the object of our observation.

At the same time, however, the viewer must be willing to perform a cognitive act of intellectual work if he or she really wants to understand the intention of the work arising from the subjective perspective of its author. This too is a fundamental experience that can lead an individual to open up with respect to things that are unknown or in any case far removed from his or her customary sphere. And this opening up can take place through both emotional participation and cognitive apprehension linked to knowledge. In any case, they are both actions that require active involvement on the part of the viewer, which in turn becomes experience and an integral part of the individual’s biography and identity.

Emotional Systems is divided into three parts: an exhibition, a publication and a programme of lectures and performances. Each of these is endowed with specific communicative capacity encompassing various levels of participation. The first is developed at the immediate level connected with visual and sensory experience. The second finds its essential rationale at the cognitive level in the textual and theoretical comparison of different scientific and intellectual positions. Evocatively associated with words and sounds, the third will be able to trigger a desire for deeper investigation in direct dialogue with scholars and experts in various disciplinary spheres, including scientists and philosophers, but also poets and musicians.

The route leading through the various rooms of the Strozzi will introduce visitors to the contemporary artists involved, consciously or otherwise, with the bodily and sensory but also rational and cognitive praxis entailed in the experiencing of emotion from the viewpoint both of the creator and of the viewer. The aim of the exhibition is to offer an overview that lays no claim to being fully comprehensive and exhaustive. The installations presented act on different principles, the goal being a cognitive understanding developed through the meaning of the emotional experience.

The Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozziina

The mission of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is to revitalise the public spaces of Palazzo, one of Florence's finest examples of Renaissance domestic architecture, and to establish it as an exciting, dynamic and international cultural destination for visitors of all ages and interests. Already the exhibitions held in the Palazzo's grand spaces on the first floor have attracted international attention. Work is currently underway to bring the courtyard back to life with a café, a bookshop and a permanent exhibition on the history of the Palazzo and the Strozzi family, as well as a programme of concerts and performances. From the outset, a key part of the Palazzo Strozzi project was to create a centre for contemporary culture at the very heart of Florence.

The Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozziina (CCCS) was created as platform for the different approaches and practices that characterise the production of contemporary art and culture. It will be open in the sense that the cultural mediation taking place is not aimed at developing one single interpretation but at stimulating a culture of critical debate and a reading of the many varied layers that make up our complex and sometimes apparently contradictory reality today.

Given that contemporary art itself has long since dispensed with the conventional logic of separate disciplines divided by style or medium, the CCCS accordingly offers a place for contemporary culture in all its diversity, presenting projects that address different aspects of urban planning, economics, social and political development, science and technology as well as aesthetics and ethics. The CCCS will be a platform for both an analytical and contemplative relationship with art and direct, active participation in the cultural process.

The exhibition space is located in the recently restored spaces under the magnificent courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi – known as 'La Strozziina' – which previously housed the cellars of this Renaissance monument, and which hosted Florence's most important international exhibitions in the years after the Second World War until the flood of 1966. The Centre comprises eleven rooms of different sizes, approx. 850 square metres. The absence of natural light enables individual curators to interpret the space in new ways and makes it possible to adapt and reshape the entire environment in accordance with the settings required by the various projects. The challenge posed by the Renaissance architecture of Palazzo Strozzi for contemporary art is taken as a stimulus to stage each new event and project as though in a theatre, constantly pursuing new possibilities of artistic communication and presentation.

James M. Bradburne