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THE RISE AND FALL OF VITRARIA



The brief ruin of an ambitious, cutting-edge museum in Venice devoted to exploring the boundaries between glass and contemporary art is a tale both cautionary and instructive.

BY LISE KJAER

The exterior of the Palazzo Morsengo, a 16th-century palace along the Rialto in San Trovaso in the Dorsoduro district that housed Vitrarìa 'A.



TOP: Fabio Fornasier (ILLUON, 2013, Handblown glass (with silver finishing), LED speakers, and digital sound processor).

RIGHT: Andrea Morsoglio (Rivoluzion, 2012, Video-sound installation, glass).



On the banks of a peaceful canal in Dorsoduro, Venice, opposite the San Trovaso church where paintings by Domenico and Jacopo Tintoretto hang, young students seek shelter from the summer sun in the cluster of trees near the beautiful Palazzo Nani Morsengo. The atmosphere on these quiet side streets is tranquil and steeped in history, a uniquely Venetian environment. A short stroll from the oldest gondola boatyard, near the historic treasures of L'Accademia and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, the old palazzo is in close proximity to popular tourist spots and presents a seemingly perfect location for a new museum. It was here that the VITRARIA CLASS+A Museum opened its doors on September 27, 2014. Less than a year later, it would close down abruptly, leaving observers disappointed at its unfulfilled potential. What follows is the story of a unique museum concept prompted by passionate ideas, innovative approaches, and an admirable will that nevertheless failed to live up to its promise or ambitious vision—yet it showed what might be possible.

It was Jaden Zuccheri and Paolo Carfagna who first came up with the idea. The two had met in 2006 while working together at the Abate Zenetti glass school in Murano. By 2013, Carfagna had bought the Palazzo Nani Morsengo with some partners. After deciding to open Vitrarìa, the two invited the Austrian curator Ewald Stary to be its artistic director. From there, it all took form very quickly. Within three to four months, the building was renovated into a raw historic exhibition space, staff were hired, public relations were outsourced to the Austrian group Ana Berlin Communications, and the first show was curated and installed.

The whirlwind transformation, at a pace not typical of the museum world, might have been the first sign that there would be nothing standard about this new art institution, and that impression would have been just fine with its founders, who were looking to reframe glass art.

The word *vitro* is a reference to the Latin word for glass. Adding “+A” signaled a broader perspective, reaching beyond the general understanding of glass and its tradition, history, and role in Venice. In an interview with CLASS, Zuccheri explained that he had already used the name for a series of exhibitions and art fairs that he had organized starting in 1999. The Vitrarìa shows took place in San Vio al Tugheto, a city known for its glass factories 55 miles (88 kilometers) northeast of

Venice. The municipality had embraced Zuccheri's large-scale events, in which he displayed the work of contemporary glass artists in churches and public spaces. Although Zuccheri had never worked in glass, he had grown up watching his father, Toni, design modern-style chandeliers, pendants, and lamps for Venini, perhaps the most widely known glass factory in Murano and one that set the pace for modern glass design. Although Jaden would soon go into marketing, he was eager to push the envelope for innovative visions of contemporary glass that included other mediums as well.

The museum aimed to transform the ways in which we consider contemporary glass. It sought to define the medium in the broadest sense, as outlined in its mission statement: “From its first traditional use via its artistic perception to the latest developments in the field of technology.” The goal was to show glass from an interdisciplinary and “holistic perspective” across time and culture, exploring several key concepts: “FRAGILITY, TRANSPARENCY, LIQUIDITY, and TRANSFORMALITY”—all in capital letters, like the name of the museum itself. A press release further explained that the museum was not to be seen as a traditional



LEFT: Eva Peric, "View from the "Sebastian Star," 2014. Composition of images on acrylic glass plates.

RIGHT: Yes Hajat, *Perform de Hayaat, Inkjet Prints on transparent film, Plethysis boxes* (2012).



space. Instead, it aimed to create a breeding ground for interdisciplinary investigations: "a vivid intersection for artists, designers, collectors, visionaries, and art lovers from all over the world. A place to break free from artificial patterns, to foster knowledge, support talent, and let new ideas, relationships, and business grow, within and even beyond the museum's walls." It was to become a lively, engaging space offering groundbreaking exhibitions, workshops, symposia, and conferences. An adjoining café was also designed in which visitors could linger, contemplate, and discuss what they had just experienced, as well as a museum store where artists could sell their innovative designs. The plans for the new venue were ambitious, and spirits were high.

"I was very much welcoming the idea of Vittoria and the idea of showing contemporary glass in Venice," says David Bandu, the co-founder, with his wife, of Le Stanze del Vetro, which opened in 2012 with a mission "to put glass back in the center of attention and discussion on the international art scene" through exhibitions and scholarship on the historic and contemporary use of glass. A businessman, Bandu is also past president of the Curie Museum Foundation of Venice, a scholar of Renaissance prints, and was co-ordinator of the exhibitions "The Genius of Venice" and "Andrea Mantegna" at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. "It's very much needed and a terrific idea."

Ewald Steahly had plenty of experience to draw upon in the role as curator: he had curated several international exhibitions, including "Silk Map" for the Venice Pavilion at the 55th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale in 2013. Steahly used the Silk Road as a metaphor for international exchange, innovation, and trade, inviting six contemporary artists to respond using textiles and soft materials. In an interview with *GLASS*, Steahly explained that while he had not previously focused on exhibiting glass, he was intrigued enough to take on the new position at Vittoria and began formulating a two-year program for the museum. He considered the role that the museum might play in the context of other institutions devoted to glass in Venice: Le Stanze del Vetro, a center for the study and exhibition of contemporary and historic glass; Museo del Vetro in Murano, which historicizes glass from the Roman Empire to today; and the Bertoglio Studio and Gallery, which pairs contemporary artists with glass makers to develop new works. Each serves a specific goal that seemed unnecessary to duplicate. Instead, Steahly found it interesting to consider glass as a metaphor from an interdisciplinary

perspective. "Glass is an intelligent material," he explained. "We use it in so many ways today, from our television screens to the curvatures of electricity and data in high-speed Internet cables. It simultaneously embodies contradictory qualities." With these key concepts in mind, Steahly set out to develop a two-year exhibition plan of four exhibitions for the museum: "Glass 44," the inaugural show; "Phenosis—from Phosor to Jeff Koons," for jewelry made by artists, co-curated with Diane Veet and based on Veet's collection; a show dedicated to masks, metaphorically addressing roles and role models in society and the need for transparency; and a fourth show dedicated to glass in all of its facets, including its use in new technology and the sciences.

The inaugural show aimed to address the four key concepts of the museum's mission statement. The goal was to bridge the narrative of historical Venetian glass production with contemporary art forms, with artists who would either directly or metaphorically reference one or more of these qualities. Steahly noted an intentional roster of 39 international artists. Some works were specifically produced for the exhibition, while others were brought in. Some artists knew and had previously worked with the curator, while others had never met him before. Some shipped their work with instructions, while others installed and participated in the opening reception. Some, such as Bruno Bonanatti, expressed their participation as a "leap of faith," while others had confidence in the process based on their previous experiences working with Steahly.

Steahly invited artists working in a broad range of mediums: painting, sculpture, installation, video, photography, and performance. The building's late Gothic architectural style presented an interior that had been largely untouched, providing an excellent contrast to the very contemporary works that greeted viewers in the lobby. Fabio Formasari's contemporary chandelier was directly in the center. Its reflective silver surfaces allude to the historical tradition of Venetian mirrors and glass chandeliers, while its hand-blown surveillance arms end in contemporary LED lights. Upon close inspection, one could see speakers that were emitting sound. Formasari's elegant and modern chandelier aligned perfectly with the museum's mission statement as it presented a traditional subject with a wonderfully quirky, new-media twist.

Another example of the museum's new profile was Andrea Merzetti's video installation "Revoluzion," projected on the back wall. It featured a video showing the artist's torso close up as the artist's hands twirled a black glass rod. Sounds from the repetitive movements passed through speakers like a continuous hum, until the glass abruptly breaks

and the video ends. As the projection loops, one notices the shattered black glass in a pile on the floor. The video thus became a meditation not only on glassblowing, but also on tension, heightened concentration, and the fragility of the material.

Eva Peric's translucent installation "View with a WINDOW" was part of the "Secession Spaces" series in which she explored the city of Vienna, where she currently resides. Surrounded by architectural echoes of the Vienna Secession, Peric decided to create a hanging installation of panels through which each viewer could pass and experience a ghostly environment. "Glass fascinates me mostly because of its fragility, but also because of the reflections it produces," Peric states. "Every time we look through a window, we are interacting with glass, but also with our own inner selves staring back at us. What we see, how we see, depends on how we are feeling inside, underneath our visible skin. So glass is a kind of mediator between our inside private world and our outside public space."

Elena Togliapietra's live performance "Black Hole" took its inspiration from what she called "the fragility of our souls." Observations on the difficulties of being a young artist and applying for low-paying jobs and internships only to be turned down again and again, create the foundation for this piece, in which a dancer, covered in black paint, moves and periodically falls to the ground. Each time she stumbles, she pushes herself up and begins to dance again. Togliapietra perceived black as a non-color that would serve to make the figure look invisible. Marks from the body on the floor form expressive traces that signify this contemporary human struggle.

Yes Hajat similarly responded to social issues, but drew from consumer and media culture instead. Originally trained in graphic design, Hajat turned to the visual arts to create works that respond critically to political issues. By appropriating and superimposing images, Hajat overflows past histories with the present, calling current political decisions into question. "Class," Hajat explains, "is the minimal material pal excellence. Used in its simplest form, it flatters a pure and transformed image, integrating lights, shades, and shifts.... When you superimpose two transparent plates with different or additional images (as I do in some of my works),



ALESSA F. Allegoria Segna, *Epimorfo n.2, 2012*. Digital collage. C-print. H 59, W 177 in.

It is not only an addition of pictures but a transfer of sense.... This material allows all the manipulations of reality."

Such questioning of reality was also the basis for the Russian art collector AES+F's three-channel video piece *Allegory: Sacra*, inspired by Giovanni Bellini's painting *Allegory Sacra* (Sacred Allegory) at the Uffizi in Florence. While the historical painting remains a mystery to art historians, some have interpreted it as representing purgatory. AES+F's *Allegory Sacra* piece the scene at an airport, as "only three does one understand that the knowledge of one's tomorrow is a total illusion." By placing ambiguous figures in the limbo of awaiting their final destination while drifting between light boxes that feature commercials for tax-free items portrayed in dreamy states of paradise, AES+F transports us into a mystical, ambiguous, yet highly contemporary space. The images include mythological figures such as centaurs, dragons, and the Hindu elephant god Ganesha. Presented on plasma screens in an exhibition space that captures the history and spirit of Venice, a tourist dream space, AES+F aimed to present a simultaneous parody and homage to the *laissez-faire* atmosphere and beauty of Venice.

Both AES+F and Mimmo Roselli had worked with Stacey for the Biennale. Roselli's installation *Scryno* at Vitraia consisted of 36-meter (118-foot) strips of window glass suspended in the air. Roselli had long been interested in the concept of borders and a "transparency of thickness" in which his installations would become a space-within-a-space for viewers to investigate. At Vitraia, the glass intersected the space along visible yet transparent spatial lines. Taking a similarly minimalist approach, Pedro Calhaz Reis has long considered space and its relation to the viewer while making use of industrial materials such as window glass. Reis's installation was part of a series in which he uses a fluorescent tube, here hanging from the ceiling.

Bruno Romanelli's abstract glass sculptures investigated the properties of light and material. Using the technique of hot-wax glass casting,



Bruno Romanelli, *Styryno*, 2013. Glass, H. 11, W. 11, D. 6 X in.



Mimmo Roselli, *Scryno*, 2014. Float glass. Dimensions variable.

Romanelli's objects embody the shimmering forms and transparent quality of glass. Tanya Pak's work stemmed from an interest in fluidity, water, undulation, and breathing. Her installation *The Moment After—Alina*, made from blown-glass drops, evoked the lightness of being suspended in air and fluctuating between fragility and strength. Light interacts with the material in ways that underline the form and material, achieving a special ethereal quality.

The inaugural exhibition presented a wide range of work in response to the concepts of fragility, transparency, liquidity, and transformability. Many of the artists have described the opening reception as a magical moment in which artists of various disciplines came together and talked. Elena Tagliapietra calls it an "unhinged event" in which different artists from many fields and nations "came together in an exploration of glass as material and concept. In this sense, Vitraia accomplished its goal of fostering an international dialogue across disciplines."

To explore the conceptual properties of glass, Stacey also included a room with quotes from Jacques Derrida referring to glass and transparency. Fragments of text were printed on glass in three different languages, and a soundtrack of actors reading them aloud played through speakers. Another way of engaging the viewer was by omitting wall text and instead having museum guides available throughout the museum and ready to answer any questions that viewers might have. In lieu of a printed catalog, a room with computer stations was installed where viewers could browse information and watch videos on the artists and the work they had just experienced. They could also bookmark and save information to thumb drives to take home with them.

When asked about the most successful aspect of Vitraia, most artists we interviewed for this article pointed to the museum's innovative approach and beautiful interior. Tanya Pak says, "I believe it was very ambitious and brave, especially when you place such an innovative concept in central Venice, where you bump into the traditional approach to glass on every corner you turn, with a few bright exceptions." Several artists pointed to fundraising, promotion, and visibility as the least successful. As Elena Tagliapietra explains, "If you open a museum in Venice, you don't have to ask a visitor's entrance fee. You need to keep it alive with sponsorship." Another artist wished that "the public relations, or spreading the story/exhibition/artist/works in media, could have been done more clearly." Were the ambitions too high to achieve in just a few months? While the amount of work accomplished in such a short

span is certainly admirable, time and funding also posed an obstacle, and not all works were installed as carefully as they could have been. However, all the artists we interviewed found Vitraia's relations with artists both fair and respectful, and they were largely given the freedom to do exactly what they envisioned.

As the project unfolded, the owners of the building decided to change course, cut the funding, and eventually close the museum. Stacey explains how funding was gradually diminishing, and other exhibitions were brought to the table as a way of boosting the museum's finances. These were exhibitions that Stacey was not involved in, and in fact did not agree with today. Zuccheri informs me, the building is undergoing renovations and will become yet another hotel. The line under the name of the private company *Vitruvia S.p.A.*

The rapid decline of the Vitraia museum project was a surprise to Landau, who says that as much as he liked the people involved and appreciated their goodwill and commitment, the curatorial premise and direction of the exhibitions were not clearly defined. Scoping traditional wall texts in favor of having individual guides explain the work to viewers didn't help matters, and the lack of information added to viewers' confusion. After the first exhibition didn't succeed, Landau says that rather than changing course and learning from mistakes, the curatorial team was even less clear about what role, if any, glass played in the work on view in the subsequent exhibition. "They lost focus, and instead of trying to react to it by getting more involved in contemporary glass and exploring the position to people, they tried to do something a bit different, and that only confused people a little more." It seemed to some observers that attendance steadily declined with each exhibition, which could be tied to a museum relying on ticket sales for its budget. "The emotion was there, but they really didn't seem to have thought it completely through," says Landau. "They all seemed enthusiastic and full of ideas, but perhaps didn't have enough experience about how to run an institution that would organize exhibitions. And it's always fundamental not to confuse the not-for-profit with the commercial."

Stacey declined to comment on Landau's critique. In response to the criticism, Zuccheri says he fundamentally agrees and was aware of the issues. He would, however, like to emphasize that Vitraia was more of an "idea" than a "project," and that with only three months to prepare and open, followed by one month to decide if was the wrong way to go, the founders had a very short time span for any kind of enterprise.

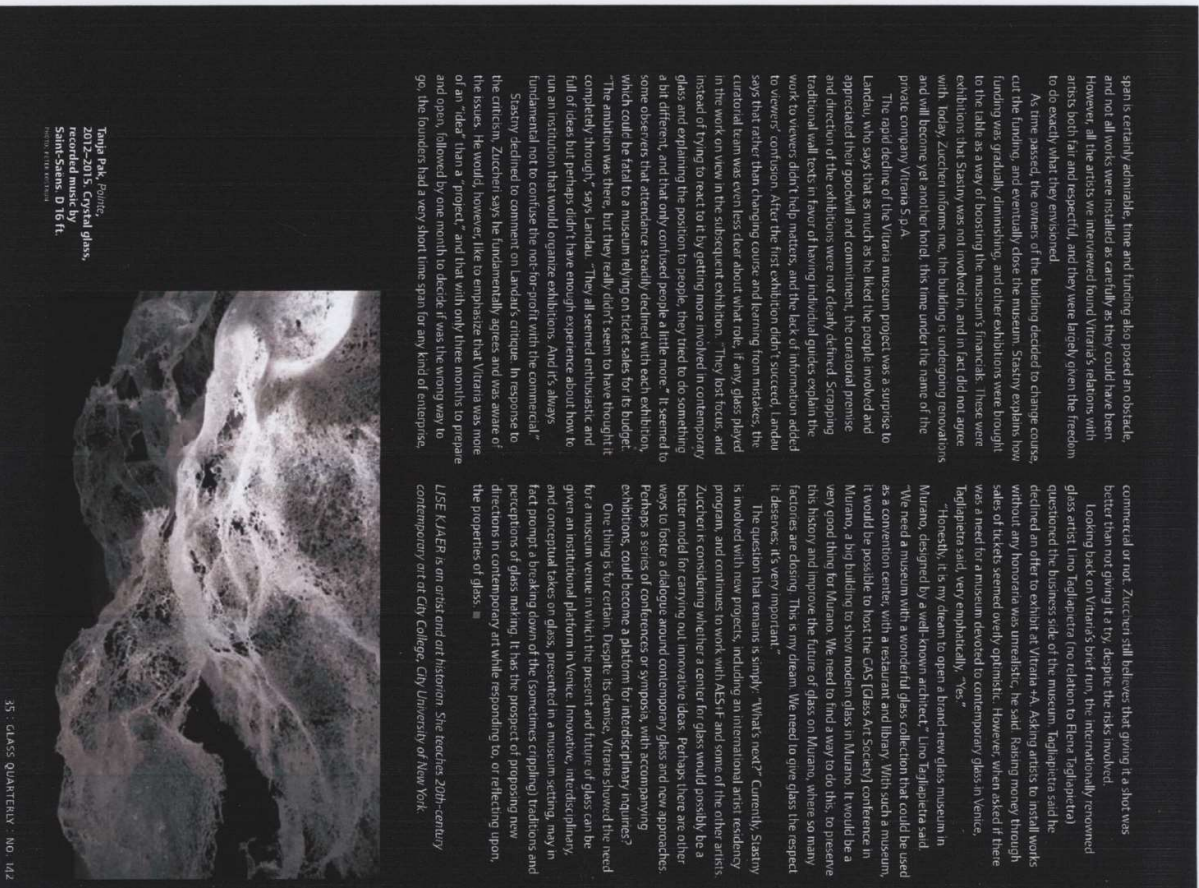
commercial or not. Zuccheri still believes that giving it a shot was better than not giving it a try, despite the risks involved.

Looking back on Vitraia's brief run, the internationally renowned glass artist Ino Tagliapietra (no relation to Elena Tagliapietra) questioned the business side of the museum. Tagliapietra said he defined an offer to exhibit at Vitraia as a asking artists to install works without any honoraria was unrealistic, he said. Raising money through sales of tickets seemed overly optimistic. However, when asked if there was a need for a museum devoted to contemporary glass in Venice, Tagliapietra said, very emphatically, "Yes."

"Honestly, it is my dream to open a brand-new glass museum in Murano, designed by a well-known architect," Ino Tagliapietra said. "We need a museum with a wonderful glass collection that could be used as a convention center, with a restaurant and library. With such a museum, it would be possible to host the CAS (Glass Art Society) conference in Murano, a big building to show modern glass in Murano. It would be a very good thing for Murano. We need to find a way to do this, to preserve this history and improve the future of glass on Murano, where so many factories are closing. This is my dream. We need to give glass the respect it deserves. It's very important."

The question that remains is simply: "What's next?" Currently, Stacey is involved with new projects, including an international artist residency program, and continues to work with AES+F and some of the other artists. Zuccheri is considering whether a center for glass would possibly be a better model for carrying out innovative ideas. Perhaps there are other ways to foster a dialogue around contemporary glass and new approaches. Perhaps a series of conferences or symposia, with accompanying exhibitions, could become a platform for interdisciplinary inquiries? One thing is for certain. Despite its demise, Vitraia showed the need for a museum venue in which the present and future of glass can be given an institutional platform in Venice. Innovative, interdisciplinary, and conceptual takes on glass, presented in a sometimes scrappy, but in fact prompt a breaking down of the (sometimes crippling) traditions and perceptions of glass making. It has the prospect of proposing new directions in contemporary art while responding to, or reflecting upon, the properties of glass. ■

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Tanya Pak, *2012-2013 Crystal Glass*, Saint-Saens, D 16 Ft.