

An Immersive, Dystopian Exhibition by Federico Solmi Debuts in Venice During 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

Presented by The Phillips Collection, Thoma Foundation, and Var Digital Art by Var Group, the exhibition by the Italian artist premieres in the Palazzo Donà dalle Rose

New York, February 15, 2024 - Examining ideas of power and contemporary culture, *Federico Solmi: Ship of Fools* opens April 18, 2024 in Venice, Italy, concurrent with the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. The exhibition spotlights new and recent video works, large-scale mixed media paintings, pastel drawings, ceramics, oleographic sculpture, and a virtual reality experience, culminating in a “total work” of art, choreographed by Solmi. Using state of the art technology, the immersive, all-encompassing environment also features a monumental holographic projection that creates a mirage within the Palazzo, both creating dialogue with and defying the historical environment in which it is situated.

The project is guided by the curatorial insights of art historians Dorothy Kosinski, Phillips Collection Director Emerita, and Renato Miracco. In addition to writings by Kosinski and Miracco, catalogue contributions by Larry Ossei-Mensah, Serena Tabacchi, and Davide Sarchioni explore global issues and the powerful impact of ever-changing technology on artistic expression. The presentation is made possible through a partnership with Var Digital Art by Var Group, which is actively engaged in promoting art through digital technologies. The Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation has generously contributed towards the success of this project, and museum support comes from The Phillips Collection.

A pioneer of media art, Solmi—an Italian artist born in Bologna and based in New York since 1999—approaches his practice from a social surrealist perspective, employing various artmaking techniques to create satirical narratives that propose a reexamination of both Western history and modern societal values. The title of the exhibition, *Ship of Fools*, references a number of classical literary and visual sources which collectively explore the ignorance and ambition of leaders and politicians. Referents include Plato’s *Republic*, in which a captain is surrounded by insubordinate crew members; a 1494 book by Sebastian Brant bearing the title *Ship of Fools*, published in Basel and illustrated with 114 woodcuts, from which the saying “ship of fools” is derived; and Géricault’s famous 1818-19 painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, from which the artist has long drawn inspiration. The titular work of Solmi’s exhibition reenvisioned Géricault’s painting through his irreverent and subversive artistic vernacular, bringing together cross-cultural contemporary and historical figures including the empress Theodora, Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Hernán Cortés, Donald Trump, Elon Musk, Kim Kardashian, Pope Benedict XVI, Napoleon, Oprah Winfrey, and Mark Zuckerberg.

Works in the presentation harness both digital and traditional approaches to artmaking. A selection of large-scale pictorial works are rendered in brightly colored pastel, and are situated alongside a selection of works on paper created in charcoal. In addition to the works on paper, 10 video works in the

presentation feature hand painting artist frames and are produced through a careful process in which Solmi draws papier-mâché figures by hand and then translates them into digital forms, bridging handmade and new media. Ceramic busts of famous figures complement the video and pastel works, adding another physical dimension to the fabric of the exhibition. A hologram and related large-scale VR work titled *The Bacchanalian Ones* allows viewers to fully immerse themselves in the carnivalesque and surreal world that the exhibition proposes.

The artist's deep knowledge of the murals and frescoes of the Italian Renaissance and 20th-century Mexican muralism movement inform the grand scale and composure of his subjects, creating a dialogue with the Palazzo in which the presentation is on view. Recognizable figures throughout history—including Warren Buffett, Benito Mussolini, Montezuma, and Abraham Lincoln—pervade the brightly colored and disarming tableaux, which, when observed through the animated and puppetesque nature of Solmi's renderings, inherently call into question their power and authority. An original composition by Grammy award-winning artist Marc Urselli creates an auditory accompaniment for the video work *The Painting Class* (2023), adding another layer of sensation to the otherworldly painting class rendered in the piece. A frank critique, the presentation holds up a mirror to present-day society and seeks to encourage a careful examination of reality and the forces that have shaped it in the Western world.

Of his subject matter, the artist states:

"I tried to give a much more explicit and understandable reading of the story, using these mythological characters to question their myth. I want to destroy these icons, these clowns covered in medals they never earned. My great effort is to understand these new power groups, the various financial tycoons, the influencers, the great contemporary industrialists, how they will be able to influence history."

Motifs explored within works in *Ship of Fools*—history, commerce, colonialism, culture, and entertainment—are mirrored just beyond the walls of the exhibition in the city of Venice itself. The artist engages all spaces within the Palazzo Donà dalle Rose to create a conversation between the exhibition and its surroundings, intentionally blurring the line between reality and fiction.

About Federico Solmi

Solmi's work utilizes bright colors and a satirical aesthetic to portray a dystopian vision of our present-day society. His exhibitions often feature articulate installations composed of a variety of media including virtual reality experiences, video installation, painting, drawing, and sculpture. Solmi uses his art as a vehicle to stimulate a robust conversation with his audience, highlighting the contradictions and fallibilities that characterize our time. Through his work, Solmi examines unconscious human impulses and desires in order to critique Western society's obsession with individual success and display contemporary relationships between nationalism, colonialism, religion, and consumerism. By reconfiguring historical narratives across eras, he creates social and political commentary works which disrupt the mythologies that define American society. By merging his paintings with game engine aesthetics, Solmi's videos confront the audience with his own absurd rewriting of past and present, merging dark humor and a sense of the grotesque with new technologies. He creates a carnivalesque



virtual reality where our leaders become puppets, animated by computer script and motion capture performance rather than string.

In 2009, Solmi was awarded by the Guggenheim Foundation of New York with the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in the category of Video & Audio.

Solmi's work was included in the 100-year anniversary exhibition of The Phillips Collection, *Seeing Differently*, and in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery's traveling exhibition, *Outwin 2019: American Portraiture Today*, as well as the inaugural exhibition of the Ocean Flower Island Museum in Hainan Province, Danzhou, China. Solmi's upcoming solo exhibition *The Great Farce* opens at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in September of 2024.

Past solo museum surveys include *Joie de Vivre* (September 2022-February 2023) at the Morris Museum in Morristown New Jersey, *The Grand Masquerade* (2019) at the Tarble Art Center in Charleston Illinois, and *American Circus* (2016) at the Haifa Museum of Art in Israel.

His work has been included in several international Biennials, including *Open Spaces: A Kansas City Arts Experience* (2018), the *Beijing Media Art Biennale* (2016), *Frankfurt B3 Biennial of the Moving image* (2015-2017), the *First Shenzhen Animation Biennale in China* (2013), the *54th Venice Biennale* (2011), and the *SITE Santa Fe Biennial in New Mexico* (2010).

From 2016 to 2019 Federico Solmi was a visiting Professor at Yale University School of Art, and Yale School of Drama, New Haven CT. Solmi was appointed guest critic at the Yale University School of Art for 2022.

Solmi is currently working on a new body of work, investigating the new tycoons and influencers of our time.

About The Phillips Collection

The Phillips Collection, America's first museum of modern art, was founded in 1921. The museum houses one of the world's most celebrated Impressionist and American modern art collections and continues to grow its collection with important contemporary voices. Its distinctive building combines extensive new galleries with the former home of its founder, Duncan Phillips. The Phillips's impact spreads nationally and internationally through its diverse and experimental special exhibitions and events, including its award-winning education programs for educators, students, and adults; renowned Phillips Music series; and dynamic art and wellness and Phillips after 5 events. The Phillips Collection's extensive community partnerships include Phillips@THEARC, the museum's satellite campus in Southeast DC. The Phillips Collection is a private, non-government museum, supported primarily by donations.

About The Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation

The Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation recognizes that education and the arts enhance individuals' lives and communities. Education is centered in the rural Southwest, primarily focusing on scholarships. In the arts, we make grants, and lend and exhibit our art collection. We are strong believers in leadership, innovation, and equality of opportunity.

About Var Digital Art by Var Group

Var Digital Art (VDA) by Var Group is a project that was created within Var Group, a leading operator in the field of digital services and solutions with a turnover of 702.6 million euros and about 3700 resources present in 10 countries around the world, as a dynamic hub for experimentation, study, research and production dedicated to the relationship between art and digital technology. A cultural and multidisciplinary hub that promotes the exchange, sharing, and construction of innovative projects with national and international partners to convey ideas and innovation in line with the values of the Var Group company of which it is an expression.

VDA unites the worlds of art and business with the aim of putting Var Group's expertise on issues of technological innovation at the service of artists by providing support and new digital solutions, and with the desire to grow by offering the artistic world shared spaces, important stages and the opportunity to experiment and create new ways of expression.

Under the artistic direction of curator Davide Sarchioni, VDA collaborates with artists to support the production of new works (VDA Factory), organizes exhibitions (VDA Exhibition), meetings (VDA Forum), and training projects (VDA Lab).

VDA by Var Group is also a patron: it commissions and acquires works of art for its collection (VDA Collection).

In 2023, VDA launched the I edition of VDA Award, a biennial award that was the first in Italy to chronicle digital art trends with respect to the dissemination and experimentation of digital technologies to support, enhance, and promote contemporary artistic creation, with special attention to young and emerging artists.

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