

## **“First times” GAM, Turin** **by Leonardo Bentini**

I've known Davide for quite some time. We first met through a mutual friend (as so often happens in this field). Shortly afterwards, he came to Milan for a residency. I was wavering between remaining in Italy or leaving, and he often said these were probably the last residencies he would be able to do. He was a little weary of it all, and he was reaching the age when calls for applications start to turn up their noses at you. In short, we were both in precarious situations, both exhausted by the uncertainty awaiting us.

It was the end of July, and we would see each other from time to time in his studio or just around the corner, in the bars of the Chinese quarter near the Monumental Cemetery. A few days later, I took two friends to visit the studio. I dislike talking about work straightaway when I meet someone new, and with Davide we often laughed and joked, so I never felt the need. That day, however, I decided to take them on a studio visit. In the end, I thought I knew him well enough to realise that I understood almost nothing about what he did. It was a long studio visit. One of my friends asked countless questions, all very technical. He was trying to grasp something. I listened and watched. I got a little lost in those performative images, and I also tried to fathom where those works came from. It is difficult to define Davide's practice, and in fact, I have decided not even to try in this text. Instead, I will attempt to recount three moments when I encountered his work. Because I believe it is in the contexts in which it is placed that Davide's practice can be understood, in the thick cracks of a system that all too often fuses with life. That is where Davide's work exists; where the images and symbols of a subtle and viscous capitalism are found, which he overturns in satirical manifestos.

As to the first encounter with his work we are already halfway through, when, during the studio visit – towards the end, to be precise – he showed us the project he was working on: *Hey there you, looking for a brighter season (moth)* (2023); an environmental installation where a series of strobe lights connected to a binary circuit for the reproduction of Morse code signals reproduce the phrase “Fear of missing out”. When he showed us the work, which on that occasion was reproduced in a small room above his studio (later, for the final presentation of the residency, it was installed in the main hall for external viewing), it still lacked a title, which today, when I read it, brings me back to that distorted sense of hope I felt during those days when I finally chose to leave the city where I lived. I have often spoken about this in the texts I have written over the past two years. I certainly do not do so out of personal vanity, or to parade what I myself decided, but because I believe that what compelled me to make that choice is a widespread political condition of those like me who live on the margins of the Western system. I do not wish to play the victim; on the contrary, I am perfectly aware, as is Davide, of our privileged position, especially in this historical period. But discussing the oppressive psychological states to which capitalism drives us also means recognising the position we occupy in the immense global social pyramid and thus learning to manage our mental health outside the competitive patterns that this very short circuit imposes upon us. FOMO – fear of missing out – especially in Milan, is one of those things. It was one of the reasons that drove me to such profound malaise that I thought it better to abandon the little I had built, rather than continue to hope for a future that, alas, belonged only to categories far higher than mine. Sadly, this need carried me even further away from what I truly required: a break from late capitalism, not another gigantic metropolis where every three months they raise the price of public transport and push the suburbs still further away.

Like a *moth* on a summer veranda, I watched those flashing lights. I felt the anguish and the lure, the adrenaline of something I had to do, which would put aside every basic need, which would again call into question who I was, what I did, what I wanted. Truly? After two, almost three years of watching those strobe lights flicker schizophrenically, I think I can say they perfectly embody the deception of desire. A mirage that has already vanished by the time you reach it.

The second time I saw one of Davide's works was at a festival in the southern suburbs of Milan. In the town hall, in the Corvetto district. One of those ‘15 minutes to the city centre’ buildings. With a spectacular view of the entire city centre from the roof. A paradox.

Down in the courtyard, on a wall about fifteen metres high, the jammed grin of a smiley face rotated slowly. This was *FENOMENO (Smiley) (2022)*, perhaps one of Sgambaro's most emblematic works. It comes in three different colours: red, blue and green. I kept trying to take photos and videos, but each time, a piece of the circle was absent. Incomplete as it was, it was not very 'Instagrammable'. Second paradox.

I had arrived at the festival fifteen minutes earlier and what appeared was a clear signal: reflect on what you see, for not all that glitters is gold. I spoke with Davide, because that macabre grin circling endlessly left me with many thoughts and a certain unease. Maybe it was the town hall, which resembles a cross between a brutalist cathedral and a drug den, or the fact that while speaking with Davide, I could make out only one word in ten because there were too many people and the music was deafening. I do not associate those few words with his face, not even with his mouth, which was close to my ear so he could whisper better, but with the image of the translucent organic plastic cup he was holding in his hand as he told me that *FENOMENO (Smiley)* is the rot you cannot see, the *niceness* of late capitalism. A comfortable mask on a deplorable person. The smile kept spinning, and I asked him (yes, I tried again) why I could not take a photograph of it. He told me that by overloading the laser mechanism, the image reproduced undergoes an overproduction of PPS (points per second), which makes it extremely difficult to capture with photographic devices, in turn making it very hard to document the work. I think we are at the third paradox. Although in this case, rather than a paradox, Davide's is perhaps a somewhat radical technical choice. Documentation, particularly in contemporary art, functions like the aforementioned niceness. Every self-respecting contemporary art space (and especially those eager to sell themselves as hyper-professional) employs the highest level of documentation, naturally associated with masterful social communication. In the questionnaire *Teaching Notes: 4-Dimensional Design (1978)*, Paul Thek asks, "Should art be useful? Useless? What is pablum?". Consequently, I wonder, where does a work that disrupts this system belong?

The last meeting was in winter. Davide wrote to me a few days earlier that he was coming to Milan to present a work and asked if I knew anyone who could perform, as the person he had engaged had unfortunately pulled out at the last minute. I do not recall how it ended. But I went to the gallery courtyard at 7 p.m. It was cold and damp, and we were practically all friends for the most part. After a while, clad in a black bomber jacket, baggy jeans and a New York Yankees hat, the performer sat down on the edge of the gallery's raised outdoor patio. All concrete. She made a few movements to settle and suddenly became motionless. The body in *No more blue tomorrows (spit) (2023)* is in fact superfluous. She was a sort of 'display neck' for a jewel-like work (to be applied to a tongue piercing) that simulates a thread of saliva. Spit falling from the mouth. Davide never explained this work to me. Yet I remember his face looking troubled for other reasons (though I am sure he was also glad). So I will end here, with the image of spit.