

21 May 2022

1st July 2022

47 rue de Montmorency - 75003 Paris

Opening hours: Tue-Sat 11am - 7pm

"Nope!" is an informal, sympathetic negation, but it can also be defined as an empathetic NO. It is from this demystification, or paradox, that Davide Sgambaro's first solo exhibition in Paris is born, exploring existential issues through irony and playful symbols. The protagonists of "Nope!" are diverse: they all carry their own stories, united by a narrative that unfolds step by step, activating a process of identification in the visitor. Composed of four stages, this conversation retraces the "Nope!" exhibition from work to work, tracing its genesis and revealing its profound intentions, which express a version of the present condition, translated by the artist into a poetics of precariousness.

*Ilaria Gianni: Vertigo is a sensation of disorientation in space, a perception of instability. A sort of breaking in a feeling of balance, perceived as a state of calm or indifference, which forces us to become aware of our body in space. Sudden and often uncontrollable, vertigo can also be provoked, for example, by a physical pressure that one undergoes when riding a carousel. The sociologist Roger Caillois explains in his book "Les jeux et les hommes": "It is a momentary exit from the surrounding reality and then a return to it. It is a circular and magical journey which, for a moment, takes us away from the usual movement and creates an intense emotional experience."*

*In the exhibition you have included three versions of "Calcinculo", a work that echoes funfair's "flying chairs", consisting of a motorised rotating column from which seats are suspended on long chains. The goal is (at least in Italy) to catch a prize on the fly, usually the tail of a stuffed toy. "Calcinculo" is a pas de deux driven by the centrifugal force of a machine, unpredictable and a symbolic expression of precariousness. What does this element of playful vertigo tell and represent?*

Davide Sgambaro: "Calcinculo" is a series of sculptures that, in addition to expressing an obvious playful reference, which you have properly mentioned, represents a collaboration between individuals through an action that is generally perceived as a negative one. I like the idea that by kicking someone in the ass, you can win a prize. It triggers a result that is completely opposite to one of the meanings usually attributed to this action. I also like the fact that such a technique has been studied and refined over time. I am fascinated by anything that is improvised, revisited, reinvented and that one would not expect to work, which then becomes an effective solution. This is why the carousel trivially called *Catenelle* was later named *Calcinculo* ("calcio in culo" in Italian literally means: kick in the ass)."

To date the series consists of four sculptures, three of which are on display. They are suspended by a pulley system, that makes them potentially usable. The sculptures are faithful reproductions of the tails used by fairground entertainers. The composition of these objects is often the result of my encounter with various materials: balloons, teddy bears, buoys, hoops, fake animal tails, anal plugs, etc. Objects that come from a playful imagination, experienced and revisited, perhaps even unconsciously, carry very specific meanings. Another important element is added by the viewer of the work who, attracted by this suspended object, immediately takes a seat on the merry-go-round and waits for a kick in the butt to win the prize. In *Nope!* these sculptures sway, driven by the force of the air in the installation "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do", generating a direct dialogue.

*Ilaria Gianni: Here the kick in the ass is interpreted as a nudge from someone, in its positive connotation, as the possibility of accessing an opportunity and not the cause or consequence of a relationship oscillating between success and failure. In this case, the helping entity is a Tube Guy, the protagonist of "Father, Forgive Them for they know not what they do". Tube Guys (also known as Skydancers) are often spotted on street corners, in disused car parks, outside shopping centres. They too dance powered by a mechanism. Tirelessly, they shake, fall and get up again, with a naive smile perpetually plastered on their simple faces. A pervasive advertising*

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*product that manages to be hypnotic, exhilarating and existentially desolate all at once. They are solitary dancers, who embed themselves in the exhibition space, collide with the ceiling and walls, slowly self-destruct. Their voice is the constant dark moan of air engines. They are at the mercy of something uncontrollable, also too precarious in their own existence; in a society that uses them and where the environment wears them down and does not protect them. Who are these characters and what do they tell us? Are they the ones who need to be forgiven or are they the ones who ask to be forgiven?*

Davide Sgambaro: To imagine this object as a solitary dancer is a perfect idea. It's a kind of self-portrait, an individual at the mercy of fate, who moves according to the opportunities and unforeseen events of life. Here we return to the ambivalence of the expression "Calcio in culo" in its two readings, positive and negative. The unpredictability and the permanent social pressure linked to the reputation slowly lead to an uncontrollable self-destruction. We could also talk about burn-out, for example, or anxiety for a high performance. At the same time, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do", is also a kind of encouragement for those who have the strength to face these situations in a humble and professional way. The stuffed toy does indeed smile, his slow dance inevitably leads to wear and tear, but he never gives up hope, which is reflected in his perhaps somewhat naive expression. The series "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do", dates from 2016. For this title, I remember choosing a quote from the Gospel of Luke, as a provocation to a provincial thought: I was asking forgiveness (ironically) for having decided to do this work (artist) despite the heavy criticism of the social environment around me. I was aware of my choices. Despite being stuck in an unconscious guilt created by different expectations from others, I was happy. It's a kind of implicit spite. I have always been interested in the dynamics of joking and cheating. Cheating is also found in the imaginary of fairs where the first prize is never accessible, even if we still believe in it. Joking, on the other hand, is very often used as a technical expedient. The joke, the spite is a serious thing, a primitive form of resistance. As in the work *So-so*, where, in addition to reworking the dancer's face in a different mood, I work on foam rubber with a technique borrowed from these small acts of adolescent vandalism. The drawing on the foam rubber is nothing more than the burning of a cigarette: a complex but recognizable and shareable gesture, the trace of a ride on public transport, where sorrows and a melancholic mood generate the impulsiveness that burns the seat in front of us burn.

*Ilaria Gianni: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" shows a smile, stoically kept on its face despite the unpredictable storms, while in the same room another presence shows its discontent. "So-so", which you have just mentioned, is not exactly happy. Initially attracted by the dance of "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do", it is only on leaving that the audience notices "So-so". It is then a sad face that dismisses the visitor. Perhaps someone who did not have fun at the circus: after all, behind the cheerful appearance there is always a subtle danger, a poison, a melancholy. Looking back, the precarious life of clowns has often been the subject of artistic representations (from Tiepolo to Cindy Sherman, from Goya to Picasso, to name but a few). "So-so" appears to be a fierce, ironic and cruel struggle that touches the playful dimension. And what is surprising is that one becomes aware of all this emotional entanglement through a simple sign - and gesture - printed on a piece of foam rubber. According to contemporary legend, the iconic smiley was born in 1963 in Worcester, Massachusetts, from the pen of designer Harvey Ball, who was asked by the State Mutual Life Assurance Company to create a symbol that would improve employees motivation. The smile that makes you smile. Multiple studies prove that the brain is capable of interpreting the sarcasm of emoji in the same way as it interprets verbal sarcasm, thus updating the way it reacts to the evocative power of visual information. The central role of the image (to which writing is now subordinated) and the need for immediacy, to be expressive as quickly as possible, is fully targeted here. "So-so" proposes a plunge into the iconography of the present, showing how part of your research is directed towards the language, symbols and aesthetics of the contemporary. What is the narrative potential of the lexicon that accompanies us in our daily lives, and how do you want to convey the iconology of the present?*

Davide Sgambaro: Exactly, in every performance the clown has a double face, and anyway the clown always comes out of it a bit down. I think it's more because of the responsibility he takes on, that is to say to provoke laughter while being mocked, to trigger this sadism by accepting to serve as a sponge, to absorb unconscious

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perversions. It is a job that is far from being simple. It is likely that many artists have identified with clowns, because when one contemplates a work of art, the artist is naked and defenceless in the face of the judgment of others. In addition, the role of the artist has been greatly diminished over the years by a number of factors, especially by a lack of attention, care and curiosity. A scourge that does not seem to be able/willing to be contained. I don't want to talk about recent politics, but the popular imagination judges the artist as a mixture of technique and entertainment. I think that nothing could be further from the truth. To associate culture with entertainment and craft is to deprive it of future responsibility and historical awareness. That's why "So-so" doesn't do so well and is printed on foam rubber, an obsolete material that was used to stuff cushions until a few years ago. The foam rubber sheet brings our senses back to the idea of comfort, but also to a makeshift bed, evoked by a poor material, but paradoxically also very expensive, precisely because it is becoming scarce. "So-so", as you say, is a generational mood, the choice of the smiley aims to contextualise the mood expressed in a specific time and the material in a specific imaginary. Thus, the padding, which designates the object dedicated to rest, is nicked by a burn. The feeling it expresses is that of a continuous reinvention, due to a continuous eviction, a continuous displacement: all situations are imposed and not chosen. "So-so" is a symbol of generational class resistance, which is about my generation and what we have been subjected to in recent years. It points to those who judge us as incapable, while it is the blindness of others that shows no sign of improvement. "Hail to you, hail to the blind we are becoming": this is how Jean-Luc Nancy bid farewell to Derrida in the newspaper Libération on 11 October 2004, and blind we have become, or rather, are incapable of recognising and seeking. Many philosophers have theorised about the disappearance of the figure of the intellectual, ridiculed by politics and public opinion. They have been talking about this since the end of the 1960s, and I would say that they were right.

*Ilaria Gianni: Even "The Bremen musicians", the donkey, the dog, the cat and the rooster, protagonists of the Grimm brothers' tale and transposed in your eponymous work into their respective vocabulary of emoticons, don't fare so well. Mistreated by their masters, aware that once they are old they will be cast aside, they decide to flee their farms to live independently and become musicians in the Bremen town band. This work also seems to use a symbolic device to talk about what happens in the real world, or - more directly - in the art system. As soon as one leaves the bubble of the 'young artist', the system seems to be less interested in supporting the solid research of the mid-career artist, and turns its (voracious and strategic) gaze to the search for the new, and this in a cyclical manner. It is therefore right to look for ways out and collective ways to find a land to inhabit (the house that the animals in "The Bremen Musicians" take possession of) and to share. The Bremen musicians, abstract in their icons (just as the characters in the stories are generic and abstract), travel proudly towards a new territory, towards a new page to be written. This is obviously my interpretation, absolutely personal and refutable. The allegorical, fairy-tale, imaginary dimension therefore also has an ethical and realistic implication, and the tale has always carried a content beyond the playful, by describing essential universal feelings. Nope! is about Essence and Appearance, which in itself is a significant pair for human existence. In addition to asking you who your Bremen Musicians are, I was wondering what artistic significance the duplicity of language that runs through your work has for you.*

Davide Sgambaro: "The Bremen Musicians" is a work that I think is perfect as a narrative device to sum up the whole exhibition. As you said, the nature of the tale is already a double narrative, each tale has its own moral despite an almost cartoonish narrative framework. This digital collage also presents a double line of reading: the immediate visual reference to instant messaging on the one hand, and the reference to childhood on the other. In this work, the questioning of the identity between the individual and the machine is addressed, of how the supposed convenience of automated daily life is instead jeopardised by our lack of control and the passivity to which technology sometimes forces us. That same dynamic we find in the smiley we have talked about. I have treated emoticons as real drawings by depriving them of their function of quick and impersonal responses. I have thus disturbed the Brothers Grimm by evoking the tale with all its meanings. The animals are us, it is the desire to put an end to this widespread and useless competition and to start a constructive collaboration. A wish for better times, as you suggested. Therefore, I use the duplicity of language to create a narrative paradox. This is a technique mainly used by comedians to provoke laughter. "Essence and Appearance" is indeed the method I use to observe, perceive, store and rework. This reading may seem

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simple at first, but in reality it is raw and cynical. In between, there is always the possibility of an escape route. In short, linguistic duplicity is my technique, an approach that allows me to work beyond aesthetic and media patterns; it only comes at the end, when everything starts to come together and object solutions emerge. This methodology allows me to reorganise my thoughts and not get lost in visual entropy.

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\* Ilaria Gianni is an independent curator, art critic and lecturer. She is co-founder of IUNO, a research center for contemporary art and of *Magic Lantern Film Festival*, a research-based thematic investigation of the interstice between visual art and cinema.

She has collaborated with museums, institutions, project spaces and galleries including: Palazzo delle Esposizioni; MACRO; MAXXI and National Gallery, in Rome; Matadero, Madrid; MOA, Seoul; Loop, Seoul; Villa Croce Museum of Contemporary Art, Genoa; John Hansard Gallery, Southampton. From 2016 to 2020 she was guest curator at the American Academy in Rome. Between 2009 and 2016 she was co-director and curator of Nomas Foundation, where she was responsible for the artistic programming. She has collaborated with contemporary art fairs, including ARCOmadrid, (section « Opening », 2018-2019), Artissima (section "Present Future", 2019-2021). Between 2015 and 2017 she co-founded and curated the independent art fair *Granpalazzo*.

She is Adjunct Professor at John Cabot University, the Master of Art at Luiss Business School, IED (Rome) and at Naba (Milan). She has contributed to numerous art catalogs and magazines such as: Flash Art, artforum.com, Domus, Mousse, NERO, Cura, Arte e Critica. As part of the Quadriennale d'arte 2020, she curated the project *AccadeMibact: Domani Qui Oggi*. She is co-curator of Radio GAMeC 30 for 2022.