

Un artista della domenica

Curatorial text by Elisabetta Modena

An artist residency, by definition, expects an artist to spend some time in a place other than their usual one in order to have experiences, collect information, have meetings, and produce one or more new works. The artist residencies in the 12° atelier also develop starting from a place, the Milan home of the Casa degli Artisti in via Tommaso da Cazzaniga, at the corner with Corso Garibaldi, 89/A, or rather, more precisely, from the digital reconstruction of this building, hosted on the virtual platform Mozilla Hubs at the following address: <https://hubs.mozilla.com/Ut7XCwr/120-atelier/>

However, spending the period of residency producing artworks to be exhibited within this virtual space was never a binding requirement, so when Emilio Vavarella informed us that he wanted to “subvert and overturn the premises of the residency programme” we quickly agreed with him. Instead of participating from afar, Emilio was going to transform his point of view into a space open to the virtual participation of other people: we would go, so to say, to him. Our host, or so we thought at the time, would show us the ‘behind the scenes’ of his work, maybe even his home, maybe he would lead us through the Harvard campus, where he works as a researcher. And so we could visit his studio and learn about the typical day of a young but already established artist working with digital media. Moving from the artist residency to the studio visit, so to say, shifting following the customary practice of contemporary art, to which Vavarella refers explicitly in his cycle of works THE ITALIAN JOB, whose third installment was in the making. The goal of the residency was, after all, to produce an “immersive” artwork, and considering the potential of virtual reality to teleport us elsewhere and make us feel physically present in another place, I had imagined an actual visit to the artist’s atelier.

Instead, towards the end of August, Vavarella sent us an email informing us of the content of the artwork he had just completed and of the places where he was going to lead both us and the spectators: “The highlights of my film are me reading a book in a hammock on the roof of my building, eating an ice cream with a friend in Harvard Square, going to the lake with some friends, trekking in the woods, a swimming competition across Walden Pond, some improvised poetry reading in nature, dinner by myself, and a long late night conversation on my balcony, trading books with a poet friend.”

Not what we expected: the work in fact consists of 12 hours of footage shot with a 360-degree camera positioned on the artist's head, on a hot summer Sunday (August 8th 2021), during which we are dragged despite ourselves throughout the places mentioned by the artist without being able to interact in any way. During this long performance there is no climax: every moment is important and no moment is really important. The narrative that the artist has developed is certainly based on a programme which is also a kind of screenplay written to involve the spectator in a day which, to me, did not seem so lazy, but which still maintains a certain level of boredom – sufficiently so to justify the reference to laziness in the title of the work: THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n.3, Lazy Sunday. Yet, all things considered, the artist reveals nothing of the “behind the scenes,” there is no inside peek inside the “war room:” there are no openings, no galleries, no curators, and no artworks in progress, only a Sunday like many others in which places, people and things are recorded in an apparently amateurish and transparent way.

“Is Vavarella a Sunday painter?” I asked myself. Sunday painters—a typical Italian expression—are those painters who practice art as a hobby. They paint on Sunday because during the rest of the week they are busy with their jobs: they are office workers, factory workers, managers (maybe even researchers?). Sunday painters often work en plein air, with a naïf technique and a tired visual style which has neither the intention, nor the ability, to innovate: maybe the shore of a lake (after all, only by forcing my hand could I retrace in Vavarella's afternoon swim an attempt to update that famous Sunday at the Grand Jatte).

However, things are different from how they appear at first sight: Vavarella, with this work, adds a piece—an important one, I believe—to that gallery of works which have made of the quotidian the material of a research that is all but amateurish. It is not so paradoxical, if we think that strategies for exposing oneself, or one's own living and working space, have often become general metaphors which go beyond their apparent uniqueness, even those based on boredom and on the subversion of expectations (something that happens, for example, in the six hours long night shot of Bruce Nauman's studio invaded by mice in his two famous installations entitled Mapping the Studio). And therefore, I thought to myself, Vavarella is just playing at being a Sunday painter here, and playing it very well. In front of our eyes—or maybe all around, in 360 degrees—we take one further step on the path inaugurated by conceptual artists concerned with the transformation of the artist's atelier from a physical place to a mental place: the space that we share with the artist is not just that of the project, but it is also a material space, just made of a different material, pixels.

Once again, as has already been remarked, the strategy chosen is that of the joke, of the prank: Lucrezia Calabrò Visconti compared it to the strategy chosen by the two greatest Italian artists of the mockery, Piero Manzoni and

Maurizio Cattelan, in her curatorial text written for the first chapter of the ITALIAN JOB series, entitled “embarrassment_party” (a title taken from the online residency program devised by Marii Nyröp which concluded with the robbery, carried out by the artist himself, of the whole exhibition and curatorial project.)

More than once has art exploited the mise en scene of a quotidian that virtual reality can make you feel in a new way, in its totality, even assuming the role of the artist himself. Faking the naivety of a Sunday painter Emilio Vavarella puts the quotidian back at the center of the scene and is able to make us appreciate the differences (and the limits) between a first-hand experience and its representation: by consciously exploiting this change of ‘format’ Vavarella is able to transform a lazy summer Sunday into a 360-degree lens focusing on ourselves, our points of view, and onto reality as a whole.