

Life is Currency:
Interview with Riccardo Benassi

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Brandon LaBelle: In your recent project and publication, *Morestalgia*, you take on the Internet as a complex beast, positioning it as a sort of conundrum itself that reorients time and space, that instigates new “emotional landscapes” – new forms of nostalgia as well as possibilities for belonging – and which has totally impacted on what we know of culture. When reading your book I have the feeling that I enter into a mind – an ontology! – defined by and also partially resistant to the Internet. Can you give us an entry into your practice – what concerns you most? And how does the Internet effect or guide your work?

Riccardo Benassi: Yeah, I never thought about it but I like the idea of the ontology... An ontology achieved through a stream of consciousness, a mouth that narrates while biting its tongue, synching thoughts with experiences in order to find its own existential voice, the voice and its being a choir in expanding the limits of the body, and the body and its dancing the world—permanently on and offline at the very same time. With hindsight it seemed to me that *Morestalgia* is the result of a prolonged act of self-determination towards regulatory and normative processes which – although they can be traced to the origin of our (organization as a) species – appeared to me to be the result of the overlap between

advanced technology and the organic hemisphere, therefore of the political riddles that superimposition produces. But the self is an ambiguous and transient entity, an ever-changing result of the imprinting first and encounter with fellow travelers later on, and provided internet is a truth dealer in the arena of endless variations, it appears to be extremely involved in the ongoing subjectivization processes. While using my body and life as a tool for deeper comprehension of the surrounding emotional landscape, I thought it was time to discuss how the internet aged creepily, from the anonymous emancipatory network I encountered as a teenager to the contemporary – social network-based – manufacture of nostalgia.

BL: It does seem important to consider how the internet has aged, as you say, and how we continue to age with it (or are aged by it). I also recall the wonder and creative excitement around the launch of the world wide web, and the possibility of linking and connecting, entering this uncharted space for possible artistic invention and knowledge creation. I do think it's clear that all of this has changed, and we may be left with something much more practical and operational in the end: basically, as Bifo and others have argued, we are left with "work". Here I am, working on the computer, which is immediately suggesting further work, and a whole mass of work behind me, behind this tapping out of words to you. As you say – the ongoing subjectivization process! How is this connected to nostalgia for you? Can you say more about the "emotional datascape" – how are you working with this, for instance in the related installation?

RB: The process of self-design induced by the contemporary forms of precarious labor – freelancing overall – finds in social online platforms the perfect instrument to create an image of oneself that is – phenomenologically speaking – totally invented, especially when it pretends to be honest. Within this competitive work environment the user can easily misinterpret a feeling of lacking something – working opportunities, better wages, holidays, a very fuckable body – with the one of loss, as if that absence can only be completely understood when positioned in the past. So what I called Morestalgia – which can also be understood as

(technologically) advanced nostalgia – is nothing more than a feeling of lack, self-translated as loss, whose direct reference is other human beings we value, and their experiences shared online. Morestalgic human beings are those who have the desire to live an experience they have previously understood to be a possible one, but instead of recalling it from their own past, they substitute this with an immersive navigation experience offered by the – once anonymous, now nominal – WWWeb. After keeping track of those ideas for some years I understood I had the need to build a specific installative machine, a material set-up, to let them land onto the sensible world. I focused my attention on the construction of a LED screen totally penetrable by the human body, an image you can break by passing through it, a system created to make impossible for the audience not to pay attention to the other bodies within the audience. I thought about the absence of projection both theoretically and practically as the perfect apparatus to let the Morestalgia idea meet other bodies in the present. That was the pre-pandemic present, but given time is non-linear...

BL: The installation or material set-up seems to bring into play the screen as more than a physical apparatus or neutral surface, which makes me think of Freud's notion of "screen memories" – the screen here is more a form of obfuscation, something that veils an original event or trauma; a kind of substitute. Freud understood this as a form of "screen work", a sort of work we undertake to block out, deny and replace difficult experiences. Lewis Carroll would pick up the idea of the screen, bringing us behind it to unveil a world of fantasy which of course is more real than real. In your installation we confront a permeable screen, something that is continually broken by others; and yet which also shows us ourselves, in terms of the lack or loss you speak of – screens today are different kinds of mirrors, if we think of Lacan's own screen theory; we are given our own reflection yet one that becomes totally malleable, and always put in comparison with others. This is also another kind of screen work, and I think your Morestalgia can be thought as a new screen theory. The ideological apparatus of cinema that screen theory also engaged with in the 1970s for example is replaced today with something much more sinister:

the spectacle is something we collaborate with! I'm curious, do you relate to the world of Gaming at all? I'm thinking of the recent symposium Blend&Bleed, which proposed ways of working in Gamespace that seem to suggest forms of encountering the new dynamics of spectacle you're also working with.

RB: Exactly, we collaborate with the spectacle in the moment we accept the process of self-design with which we insert our existence within both the biocapitalistic market and the data profiling system. The fact that the credit card substituted the function of the ID card could be just an example. And as much as we screen, in so much we display. More nostalgia physical set up is in a way founded on the concept of obfuscation as an integral part of any attempt to representation, the aforementioned mouth that narrates while biting its tongue. What interest me most about the Gamespace is the current gamification of everything that before it was not. From more trivial examples like collecting points on supermarket fidelity cards, you can move to terrifying ones... I'm thinking about the 2019 white suprematism mass shooting in New Zealand that was deployed with the specific intention of creating a real-time imagery retrieved from first-person shooter (fps) videogame. But I'm also thinking of the Social Credits System introduced recently by the Chinese government. From a social perspective, the gamification of the real can be seen as a foundational aspect of the infantilization of the adult, which – as we are witnessing during the pandemic – is the necessary counterpart to the accountability and targeting of the younger.

BL: You are also often dealing with architecture, whether through sculptural works that relate to furniture, or through projections within specific buildings, or through collaborations, for instance with the originators of Superstudio. Why is architecture important, or how do you understand its significance?

RB: Exactly, Superstudio is a good example of the fellow travelers I was mentioning, among other things they helped me understand that we are animals who are amazed because we suddenly understand what we are



doing. Generally speaking I'm interested in what we have in common as human beings, and architecture is a volumetric manifestation of that, a social vessel able to cast specific ideas far away, letting them pass through generations while leaving traces. Either yesterday's debris or tomorrow's foundations, architecture is alive till the moment it has a function within society. My feeling is that it is exactly our human volition towards transformative processes of survival that create constantly evolving functions. The fact that it's always sitting on the roadside makes architecture for everyone at any time. Also, architecture being a manifestation of power, it also defines hierarchies within societies by default. Furthermore, architecture's holes and openings project a specific survival system within the sensible world: If we bipeds misunderstood a window for a door we would probably die, so we take into consideration architecture since we are a child. Yet architecture can also be perceived as the bond between our species and the planet we temporarily inhabit, a tool to measure time or to simply better synch. In other words, I understand architecture's lowest common denominator – the brick – as an instrument that translates the temporality of the rock – the age of the mountains – to a time scale understandable from a human perspective. So one can say it is a reference system that helps me time in travel – quite unconsciously I suppose. That being said, I spend the majority of my days building sand castles in the right place for an earthquake.

BL: Following your ideas, architecture seems to occupy this place between geology and social performance, something that interestingly keeps us materially close to the natural world, at least abstractly, while pointing us toward the cosmos – maybe giving us a view onto the stars. In this sense, architecture becomes an apparatus, yet one that is rather always open to modification and imagination. As well as the movements of the earth! Can you describe one of your sand castles? Does sand itself offer us a medium for living in the cracks?

RB: Yes, cracks make me feel at home, especially when the result of something poorly planned, material failures, erosion of time. Inhabiting the gap is a democratic chance. I feel my sandcastles have alphabetical

grains that help me let ideas get out of my body, land in reality and most commonly disappear after a short while. Other times ideas landing in reality do not disappear immediately, they stay with me for more days and take form – artwork – with the premise the form will change constantly.

BL: So, artworks are kinds of semiotic weapons?

RB: I'd like to think so... Especially when they are installed outdoor, when they exceed the normativity and procedures implied by the hosting architecture. Yet if I think to the most effective contemporary semiotic weapon I think of the advanced / neuro marketing connected to our digital footprint, the semiotic weapon most human beings are subjected to.

BL: In recent years, you have been concentrating on the project, Daily Desiderio, a public LED display screen installed in a park in Milan and which you feed daily messages to. I'm curious how the work mobilizes the form of an electronic display, situating it in a public park, and inviting visitors, or readers, to follow your daily thoughts. It also speaks to your ongoing work with writing, which is very central to your practice. How do you see the work functioning – does it gesture toward a new form of literary work?

RB: I'm too much immersed in Daily Desiderio to be able to fully comprehend it, yet from within – given already more than 3 years passed since it has been inaugurated – certain things started to emerge. It is site-defining rather than site-specific: several strangers wrote me that they choose to lengthen their daily routes in the city with non-functional detours just to read what's written. It is an upgrade of the concept of the programmed sculpture because no one knows for how long I'll write – namely, for how long I'll live – and no one knows what will be written there tomorrow, me neither; so briefly: both contents and duration uncertainty is a specific condition of the piece. Furthermore, it is a stream: no consecutiveness, nor premeditation. It is synchronous: if you lose one of the daily messages because you were not able to pass by, then you'll need to wait until my death to be able to read that specific

message again. Within my artistic practice it is a leak generator: some messages stay with me longer than one day and they became something else, best case scenario they transform themselves into contents for another different piece. Also, every message is the same message to me, I do not have favorite ones, so I'm not able to understand why some of them have more success than others (meaning they are compulsively shared on social media or friends and strangers wrote me to congratulate or debate about the daily content). Maybe because that day was Sunday or the weather was temperate, who knows. If I'd like to use a corporative and marketing-oriented dictionary I'd say that this is exactly a user experience field test. Moreover, it is a performative object: its material finitude is defined by the organic ones of the author. I'm satisfied with this approach to a truth that can never be completely embraced... Does it mean that if, as you wrote, Daily Desiderio may gesture toward a new form of literary work, then it is inherently dialogical and it does so by racing after orality?

BL: It is interesting to see how Daily Desiderio generates these parallel conversations, or how people carry the project with them – maybe visitors (or we might call them “readers”) become voyeurs onto your life, reading into your daily lines as indicators of a body, a person they come to feel curious about? That is how I was imagining it as a form of literature: and maybe there is more than one narrative taking place. Maybe it is a type of literary machine generating numerous scenes and stories. You are both present and absent there in the park, and I can imagine residents in the area may develop an ongoing curiosity, a kind of strange intimacy with you, and how you may mirror back to them things they may also be feeling or thinking or experiencing. It is a kind of social media, yet I would say with a poetic attitude. Maybe it reminds us that social media is never truly a space for public debate, never really a civic site, and that through a more poetic approach we might start to reinvent what social media is – in terms of figuring another type of public discourse, and imaginary, there in the park. Do you intend the work as a critique of social media culture? How do you think it speaks towards augmented life?

RB: Maybe not a critique of the social media culture but of the concept of interaction in itself? Which is, questioning the idea that the role of the user has any agency. The functions any interface encompass are chosen by the interface designer not the user... That's why I mentioned the UX field before, because I feel we live an endless beta testing! This means that within any interactive reality my freedom has been programmed. Moreover, what you just wrote in reference to the poetic opening of the writing machine is beautiful also because it gets back to the relation between the medium and the message: is McLuhan still haunting us? Life is augmented already, not only because we are permanently living both on and offline at the same time but specifically because the organic essence of our bodies is an integral part of the permanent digital archive.

BL: I start to feel very depressed with this idea of being totally captured by the interface itself, and that I'm some sort of test subject... I guess you are absolutely right, and we are shown this again and again, in terms of realizing how deeply embedded we are in these cybernetic transnational cosmic systems. Maybe we can speak about the book *The Cybernetic Hypothesis* by Tiqqun? We were both reading this lately, and also thinking how their arguments about cybernetics are so completely insightful, and also wondering how their arguments speak towards the experiences of lockdown, of the pandemic over the last year. I'm curious, do you see any way out of the cybernetic mechanics of control? Or, is that even the right kind of question these days?

RB: I remember the first time we talked about *The Cybernetic Hypothesis* by Tiqqun, I told you that I felt this strange sensation of encountering an antique book that precisely because of its exit from the contemporaneity – its hiding from the immediate – it can open wide a condition that concerns the techno-political human being since ever. As a holy text so to say, it needs collective interpretations and updates, yet it drafts a specific scenario: the withdraw from the cybernetic mechanism of control. And I see that as an option, yet an elitist one, because in the current socio-political setting an incredible amount of human beings would pay this opt out from the digital with their lives, or in other cases by losing



their work and their social interactions. In other words, to withdraw from the cybernetic mechanism of control is a feasible option for the lucky few, while the majority are left with the option of “thinking out of the box” (Querdenken) on social media. So maybe to ask ourselves if there’s a way out is the wrong question, while – at the same time – to pretend we are cultural operators acting from within it already declares we’re totally fucked. From my perspective this is the only possible starting point: being conscious about the fact that the contemporary tools of repression and subjugation are not neutral and therefore not reversible, does not led to counter-action or re-action. To be crystal clear, my heart is with everyone struggling to transform a form of survival into existence for as many as possible; I think, for example, that the grassroots organizations and activists that try to let specific ideas enter the parliament in the form of new laws and legislation are doing a great attempt in moving from the (collective) unconscious to the (collective) conscious specific paradigms of power that drive our life. Yet what I’m looking for – and I often start with putting together a technology in order to create something within the visual art field – is a form of action that is disinfected by the prefix “counter-” or “re-”... or at least this is my alibi. The balance I’m looking for right now is to work in a direction that exceeds the gain for my terrestrial body and – at the very same time – can be based on small, invisible, anonymous, informal and daily political acts. One of the big frustrations of our time is agency panic, the feeling nothing that matter can be done is diluted within the cybernetic, a lot of online activities are carried out to just relieve feelings of helplessness. Yet, if we start from our everyday, from the bodies with which we surround ourselves with, a fertile territory for imaginative actions can be found in order to materialize events within the ongoing process of abstraction. A specific volition toward allied travelling companions is actually my preponderant feeling while reading the texts by Tiqqun.

BL: I can also fully appreciate focusing on the field of the everyday, one’s immediate relations, to cultivate small acts of care and concern, which can do much to reorient or assuage feelings of helplessness – to keep life centered on each other and the power of people. All of this, as you

A large LED display wall is the central focus, showing a group of people in a social setting. The text is overlaid on the image. The background is dimly lit with purple and blue light. Two black speakers are positioned on either side of the display wall, supported by metal truss stands. The floor is a light-colored, polished surface.

EVERY RE-GRET
TURNS OUT TO BE
A PRE-GRET

suggest, can become political, or already points at a micropolitical orientation in terms of developing practices. I wonder about the macropolitical, the question of institutions, how these small acts of care and concern also rely upon infrastructures of support, whether state-run or self-organized. I think this has become abundantly clear within the context of the covid-19 pandemic. How do you relate to institutions in your artistic practice? Is it important to act on an institutional level?

RB: Yes, to act on an institutional level it has been fundamental for the developing and funding of my practice, especially in terms of being able to present ideas in a context inhabited by different typologies of audiences. In other words, to meet people I would never meet in my routine. I like to think at the institution as a transient coalition of different people. As you mentioned the micro is the everyday – the flow which keep life centered on each other – and the macro is the introduction of this flow into the unknown, the encounter with unprecedented existences. So the work of art can be seen as a bridge between those two realities: I like to picture this bridge as both ancient and hyper technological, something that – contrary to all the other bridges – if it is stable it's not covering its own function.

BL: I know that you are also very active as an educator, working at a number of art academies. How does teaching relate to your practice? Is there something you experience in young students today that affects your work?

RB: What I'm trying to do while teaching is to move the question "how" we do something towards the question "why" we do something, so it all springs from the source of what I call "applied philosophy" I guess. This put me in the condition of running modules that are very far in terms of contents from each other, such as the one I'm currently delivering in different institutions: Sound design, Post-Internet Conceptual Art, Performative practices. But this is predominantly thanks to the fact that I've been inhabiting a plethora of underground subcultures able to enrich my understanding of how technology acts on our social, political and affec-

tive existence – which is exactly what I keep learning from the younger generations. I use to say that a cultural operator, in order to keep on being relevant while aging (with which I mean to be able to act within a world that s/he feels is still her/his own) needs to have children, or needs to love dancing, or needs to be a teacher. As you know I love dancing, yet since I'm an educator I do not have children, because I do not want to bring work home.

Riccardo Benassi (Cremona, Italy 1982) lives and works in Berlin (DE), Bergamo (IT) and online. He uses text and sound to question the limits of technology from an existentialist perspective, implementing poetic language in time-based environmental installations, video-essays, performances and spatial interventions made for public and private commissions.

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