

**VINCENT**  
**CORNELIUS, Inside Paolo's Brain**  
**PIETER**

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Calling them simply by name – “Vincent”, “Cornelius”, “Pieter” – Paolo Chiasera evokes the familiarity of a brotherly or friendly relationship. By putting their names together and placing his name among theirs, the artist suggests, implies that together they all form part, or might form part, of a single group.

*Group*

Behind these names lie the figures of three renowned painters: Vincent Van Gogh, Cornelius Escher and Pieter Brueghel. It is not so much the arbitrary nature of this intellectual relationship that appears as a paradox to us, but the naturalness with which this relationship is made, or should we say imposed, and then retold. By presenting “as normal” a situation which is *per se* anything but normal, and wholly incongruous gestures and attitudes as perfectly commonplace, Chiasera puts together his latest project entitled *The Trilogy: VINCENT, CORNELIUS, PIETER* on the founding stones of contradiction.

*Space*  
*Time*

The face of the artist is transformed in the most playful of ways: by wearing a painted rubber mask in order to take on the features of another artist, whose face has been previously recomposed on the basis of the imagery documentation available, i.e. prints, paintings and photographs. This means is still strongly reminiscent of how, over the course of history, artists have frequently imagined fantasy communities or gatherings to serve as a sort of time machine with which to reflect on one's own time *through time itself, through space*. To this effect, Chiasera cites the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Rooms where, for example, Raphael might imagine Socrates with the face of Leonardo da Vinci, tracing the fruits of Renaissance culture back to their ‘ideal’ roots in the classical period. On the other hand, we can just look at one of the many Biblical frescoes or paintings in the history of modern art, from Giotto to Piero della Francesca, from Caravaggio to Rembrandt or Velázquez, to understand that dressing up others in contemporary robes has often been used as a means by which to overcome the spatial and temporal distance between those subjects and to feel closer to them and their everyday thoughts and needs.

*VINCENT, CORNELIUS, PIETER: WE WORK IN CAVES...*

*Concepts*

While embodying the *hero*, as he does in all his videos, he puts himself to the test to demonstrate the plausibility (albeit simply on the level of logic and imagination) of a particular linguistic and iconic clause. Thus, Chiasera sets off on this competition rush back and forth through time, regardless of logic, focusing on the relationship between the speculative dimension and the physical action field, in the attempt to bring this relationship to a breaking point, in order to observe the resulting effects. From the artist's point of view, since “reflecting” and “representing” both stand for “enacting”, or – as this is often a playful, ritual act which unleashes his strong sense of aggressiveness – perhaps for carrying out

a trial or taking up a challenge, maybe it would be best to speak of “staging”. In other words, his masks are always *agents* or *actors*. “What do these masks do once on stage?”, is just as important a question for the artist to ask as “Who do they represent?”.

By donning the mask of other famous artists, Chiasera chooses to represent actions bereft of any clear goal, yet loaded with a strong emotional charge and with a scarcely concealed air of aggressiveness. Van Gogh and Escher do nothing but represent themselves in the act of doing something the meaning of which eludes us but which to them appears to be of the greatest importance. In other words, they represent the way in which something else acquires sense and value on an exquisitely individual level. The fact that the individual in question happens to be an artist, and a famous artist to boot, allows Chiasera to have easier access to a level where what makes sense and value for one, may be shared by others as well. This means accessing a level on which a collective myth may be generated by an entirely private and personal mythical dimension.

*Myth*

*Icon*

Within the artist’s research, the identity of the myth within contemporary culture and society plays an important role, where “myth” stands for a personal projection and obsession, as an everyday process of continuously recreating reality to reflect his own imagination. By observing the developments and the implications of this ‘mythical’ reinvention of day to day life, the artist traces the dynamics with which the intimate dimension of the myth tends to reflect, transform, mutate and modify itself – through the mechanisms of emulation, celebration and consent – so as to obtain the collective group dimension.

In this way, instead of remaining relegated to a separate ‘mythical’ dimension, estranged from power and divorced from history, myth emanates directly and consciously from history. For this reason, myth works as any other *vulgar* (in the sense of *popular*) means in any society: the myth conveys its “larger than life” influence onto daily life, to grant itself metaphorical and iconic redemption. As we may see today through contemporary cinema, music, and even political life (all the levels exploited by Chiasera), the myth and the icons on which it rests serve to modify self-perception, to personalise an inner mythical vision, to trigger a “DIY mythopoeia” which, by causing a disassociation between the real and imagined self, allows us to access a less particular and more universal self experience, less individual and more collective, or rather more comparable to that of the group albeit inevitably less authentic.

When Chiasera wonders “Why didn’t Bruce Willis intervene on the 11<sup>th</sup> September?”, it is to this social function of the myth that he is referring, or rather to the corrupt nature of the contemporary myth: too clearly false and falsifiable, to often not up to the task of carrying out this role satisfactorily, too “contaminated” by the daily life which he should aim to redeem. In other words, he tends to turn out to be short on contents, leaving only an attractive yet hollow form...

*VINCENT: POP!*

In the artist’s perception, contemporary history (along with those who hold the right to tell it through the mythical metaphors that lend it standing and the icons that illustrate it) is therefore profoundly unsuited to telling its own history satisfactorily. Our era would therefore be a sort of a prehistoric one still in search of its own language, but paradoxically, it is also an age with a deep-seated sense of mythology to which to refer.

*History*  
*Power*

For this reason, Chiasera takes on a double-edged approach. On one hand he critically explains the functioning and transmission of contemporary myths, and on the other hand, he lets himself be overwhelmed by them entirely uncritically in order to participate – despite its inadequacies – in the to and fro of myth creation as his only creative means by which to let off both individual and collective steam. This double-edged approach, somewhere between conscious attack of the mechanisms of the social and aesthetic induction of a clearly ineffective form of mythology, and a blind trust in the myth as a representation of contemporary history and power, is the ambiguity that Chiasera strives for and which allows him – as an artist - both to toy with contemporary myths and yet judge them at the same time.

*They dressed up in the night:*  
*Fanaticism*  
*Ambition*  
*Ignorance*

In another recent project, *YDV - Young Dictator's Village* (another sort of 'trilogy' in its own right), Chiasera identified a closed and auto-referential space and time in a suburban context (the Molinella farm, near Bologna) placed along that divide between the city worker and the country worker, the industrial and the agricultural in which Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>1</sup> entrusted the rebirth of the myth in contemporary dramaturgy. Here nine boys dressed up in all the trappings of their own idols, thus removing "the distance which separates them from their own ideology", and took possession of three houses with which to found a village where they might let loose their "need for emulation through ransacking, fighting and destroying". For this reason, Mao Zedong went to live with Josif Stalin and Pol Pot, Benito Mussolini with Francisco Franco and Adolf Hitler, and Idi Amin Dada with Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein.

Chiasera creates nothing different with this village for young dictators from any of the many forms of social escapism found in mass-consumption society, identifying furthermore the same no-man's land between town and country where the great shopping centres and multi-screens are to be found. In this seemingly neutral territory, the loss of historical memory has *carte blanche* to enjoy the aesthetic sheen and the ritual fascination with a powerless ideology, one bereft of any real function, as recreational and metaphorical as a game.

What links *YDV* to *The Trilogy* is the binding between the person and his symbolic representation, between the loss of real substance on behalf of the one represented and the emotional charge with which the representation keeps going. By transposing the history of art onto a biographical dimension, Chiasera may reinvent historical figures whose affinity provides the starting point for a surprisingly playful approach, or adapt them to his own private mythology through the principles of *fuzzy logic*, which the artist has already used more than once:

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<sup>1</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini is the icon of another recent video of the artist (*The Following Days*, 2005). Pasolini literally enters into his head and falls asleep, before it catches fire.

*VINCENT: I AIM TO ENTER THE YELLOW HOUSE, BUT I AM NOT READY TO CUT OFF MY EAR!*

*CORNELIUS: I LONG TO COME FACE TO FACE WITH NATURE, BYPASSING THE RULES OF PERSPECTIVE AND CONSTRUCTION!*

*PIETER: IN THE ATTEMPT TO FIND NEW PATHWAYS, I GET HOPELESSLY LOST AMONG THE CROWD!*

Actually, that is not exactly what happened...

But what the artist is trying to show is the very loss of substance and interest of the historical truth in favour of this mythical manipulation. To achieve this goal, he uses a series of logical sidesteps which, while appearing relatively simple, are in fact able to overcome far more complex logical obstacles. In *The Trilogy* the artist pushes up a concept from the level of historical reality to that of the individual myth, where the latter becomes an ever more strongly pervasive and convincing element as much as it is personal and fanatic. This concept is even more true if the person that adopts it is willing to believe in the projections it sets off, not merely in terms of similarity but in terms of genuine reality.

In the trilogy, as in the artist's other previous works (the videos *Riflettendoci*, 2000; *Equilibrio parallelo* and *20° livello*, 2001; *La telefonata* and *The Wall*, 2002), the mythical construction that Chiasera sets up on a very personal level becomes an almost competitive test of the principles underlying the artistic representation and which dictate its similarity on the basis of the geometrical and perspective construction of Renaissance ascendancy. Feeding off the virtual and artificial time and space of the work of art, this similarity is taken for a ride with a series of jokes, optical, rhythmical and acoustic tricks. In this fluid and hybrid space-time, the image surpasses the role allotted to it by Renaissance perspective as a "window on reality" only to decline an infinite potential (infinitely producible, infinitely destructible, infinitely substitutable and reintergrable, infinitely flippable, speed-uppable, slow-downable, etc.), loaded down with a self-destructive, anti-economic potential along a horizontal surface..

*VINCENT: BUT ALSO AN INFINITELY VERTICAL REGENERATOR...*

At the heart of this trilogy lies this trust / mistrust in the mythopoeiacal process of which the creator of icons and myths is responsible. A both positive and negative process, exciting and disheartening at the same time. In particular, the art image, when placed side to side with the many languages with which contemporary art has mingled, becomes something of which the artist is both creator and critic, the single and extremist hand and the player among many in an ever wider, shifting, nomadic and clandestine network. The artist has already reckoned with hip hop artists like the rapper Tupac, to whom he provocatively decided to dedicate a unnoticed monument doomed to self-destruction. Chiasera is motivated by the very existence and the proliferation of these networks, "from the Carbonari movement to computer hackers", and by the disparity between the exaltation of the technical means available to the contemporary artist and the mediocrity of the aesthetic and cognitive results reached through their normal use.

From this point of view, what Chiasera states about the - at least - double stance from which the trilogy should be viewed (both as a whole and in its single elements) is very interesting: "The horizontal development of the trilogy may be compared to a circle, yet on a vertical axis, it moves up from one level to the next in a spiral fashion".

*Circle*  
*Spiral*

As if every single chapter were to do with a form of obsession or a form of geometry, or even the geometry of an obsession, which are not self-defined but which depend on this mutual *impasse* between self- and hetero-definition, between movement and stasis, evolution and contestation, until a pathway is formed which – while not providing a way out – leads us at any rate to imagine a happily self-sufficient mechanism insofar as it is based on the constant repetition of its component parts. A “bachelor machine” paying due homage to Szeemann<sup>2</sup>.

This search for a closed and concentrated starting space, filled with emotional investments and yet aimed solely at going beyond it, at the refusal of its self-referentiality and ignorance, of the misunderstandings to which it inevitably leads, is the umpteenth contradiction on which Chiasera builds the fragile architecture of this spiral of flat contradictions and with which he blurs the presence of the artist and the notion of artistry which are constantly attacked yet constantly brought back onto the scene, like a character from the *Commedia dell'Arte*. It is not mere coincidence that the conclusion that the three protagonists come to is equally disastrous; however, in the very three-sided construction of the project, this failure is constantly highlighted reciprocally, giving a somewhat grotesque and comic effect, almost like a Chuck Jones cartoon, with endless examples supplied of the working of geometrical fractals.

The series of 60 drawings in Indian ink and tempera produced at the same time as the videos of the trilogy show the paradoxical nature of stories which do not only repeat themselves, but do so – or rather get pushed from one to the other among waits, tortures, coffins, stills and *sefirot* (one of the most important concepts of Jewish Cabala which envelops the concepts of numerology, story-telling and illumination) – in order to balance, walking on tiptoes, monstrous and chivalrous looped adventures...

*Loops*

... loops which do away with all linear notions of time, in which those who fall will rise once more, and those who rise see the writing already on the wall...

*PIETER: THE WORK IS ALWAYS BASED ON TRUST; THERE IS NO WRITING ON THE WALL...*

... in an ongoing overtaking of oneself, whose foolhardiness – to quote the reflections of Konrad Lorenz on aggression – shows what we might define as *militant enthusiasm*<sup>3</sup>.

*Madness*

In the second video of the trilogy, *CORNELIUS*, Chiasera, dressed up as Cornelius Escher, crosses the mountain of wood created by the Austrian artist Hans Schabus on the occasion of the 2005 Venice Biennial (*Das letzte Land – The last land*, 2005), only to turn up again inside the white cube of the museum. A route which does not stray from the world of art and its environment, providing a burning,

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<sup>2</sup> Harald Szeemann, *Bachelor machines*, Kunsthalle Bern, 1975 (travelling exhibition: Venice, Brussels, Düsseldorf, Paris, Malmö, Amsterdam, Vienna).

<sup>3</sup> Konrad Lorenz, *On aggression*, Mjf Books, New York, 1997.

almost autistic criticism of its growing self-referentiality. A circular itinerary that is a search of the space where artist's reflection and action are projected onto: the museum. Even the construction of a coffin of light fails to take him anywhere else. In the closing scenes of the video, the artist and his character are absent; we are left with a vision of a polar ice cap between the sky and the sea, creating countless geometric shapes split up by an icebreaker boat. Hanging on the edge of a mysterious image which hints at disenchantment, maybe at madness without falling into its own trap. Madness may be seen as the inevitable end that this schizophrenic path leads to, hinted at through a metaphor for artistic failure, of self loss, which is also – enter another double stance – a metaphor for artistic inheritance which is transmitted obsessively. Wearing a new mask: dying as Escher and coming back to life as Brueghel, just the way that Van Gogh died and came back as Escher.

### *Paolo's Brain*

This precariousness of the artist's identity and fate leads us to the precariousness of the museum as the institution which should represent and document it, while following its obsessive characteristics of doubt and exaltation. In his treatment of the setup of his own show, Chiasera adopts the same mixed approach of diffidence and excitement. The artist decides to give a live show of the elaboration process of his own private myth which is leading him from Mount Etna to the Po Plain, from Bologna to the Antarctic – and perhaps in the future to the top of Keope's pyramid – through a mixed-media installation involving the entire length of the exhibition: a video projection, an on-screen projection, a large-scale mural, photography, sculpture and other elements besides. Among these elements, the artist also includes a plaster skullcap showing a map of his own brain, almost as if to be guided by a sort of inner map; perhaps to see from the outside the contradictory directions the path of his artistic practice is going in, or, perhaps, just to look at the brain at work beneath the mask.