

A Starry Night; Under the Open Sky

Every moment of perception contains a whole personal and collective past, our body is the incarnation of that past; and with every moment of perception this past is re-ordered and revalued

From *Meaning and Building*, by Joseph Rykwert

Todd Haynes' 2007 Bob Dylan biopic, *I'm not there*, opens with a shot of actress Cate Blanchett as Dylan, dead on an autopsy table. Haynes gave himself the difficult task of telling the life of a singer-songwriter who is both legendary and still alive – to do this, and to do it truthfully, he had to start with a corpse. Understanding that it was more truthful, more biographic even, to abandon any type of reality, Haynes offers viewers a chance to meet the man through a retelling of fictional, Dylan-inspired tableaux. Dead from the start, Dylan is reborn as six characters played by different actors (including a child and a woman, Blanchett), each the personification of an aspect of Dylan's complex identity. There is no knowing whether Bob Dylan could ever be represented in film, but it is certain that *a* Bob Dylan could be. The script, assembled from archived interviews, bootleg songs, poetry and sundry biographical ephemera, is structured as a series of different contexts from which a new Dylan may emerge.

Meaning is derived from context, and in Paolo Chiasera's practice, like in Haynes' movie, context is conceived of as material – worked as a potter does with clay. Stretched, layered, and modified, Chiasera's large-scale, interior landscape installation *Unter freiem Himmel* (Unter the Open Sky, 2009) at Marta Herford, presents its viewers with a morphing frame of context with each view: spatial-phenomenal, social-relational, phenomenal-political, pictorial-historical, historical-political, etc. Like the uncertainty of finding Dylan in the kaleidoscope of stand-ins, *Unter freiem Himmel* denies us stable footing as we pass through its *Berg* ('mountain') and *Wald* ('forest'), shifting our faculties of perception from the physical to the intellectual and instinctual modes. Much of Chiasera's work exists as a moment within a series of transmutations – as a record of progressive afterlives. Seeing Chiasera's work exhibited is like seeing a still from a film – an isolated appreciation which is only enhanced by learning its context. As in the 2008 installation *Forget the Heroes* – where clay was formed into four statues, smashed against a checker-board plank, ground into powder, and reconstituted back into clay that was then molded into a single sculpture – Chiasera's work often changes states, bringing the viewer to different vantage points that each offer a new horizon of interpretation. The original statues were of Le Corbusier, Seymour Cray, Adam Smith and Noam Chomsky, and their subsequent transformations allowed Chiasera to *drift* from the historical weight carried by these figures – renewing and restoring historical signification against the simple indexing of history that has recently become shorthand for 'research' in the starved languages of contemporary art. Literal reference to the past has the convenience of a hitched-ride, allowing some contemporary artists to perch upon shoulders without having to appreciate the nature of the very structures being appropriated. *Unter freiem Himmel* is a foil to such practices, a meta-text rather than a slogan for historical recall. In fact, it is helpful to think of Chiasera's work as text: written in this renewed, constantly evolving language, its richness revealed under careful study, and not simply the casual glance.

Marta Herford, both the institution and the building, serves well as a departure point for a discussion of *Unter freiem Himmel*. In 2005, Frank Gehry expanded the museum, an existing industrial building by Herford architect Werner Lippold dating from the 1950s. Glinting silver petals resting on bulging brick vessels surpass in showmanship the older, rectangular structure. Completed after the iconic Bilbao

Guggenheim (1997), which propelled Gehry's name into common parlance, Marta Herford announces itself as an art institution through its visual association with the Bilbao Guggenheim. It is a building that exploits the operability of cultural signifiers, and utilizes them to construct its own context in Herford – a historic township of 60,000+ people, about one hundred kilometers from Hanover. As an expression of the Gehry brand – which temporarily resuscitated the de-industrialized Bilbao back to life (attracting more than 100,000 visitors to the city per month in its first few years) – Marta Herford strategically positioned itself within an imaginary international community of famous museums. With the same silvery curves as its Basque counterpart, the museum's design alludes to the Bilbao Guggenheim, promoting further associations with the venerable Guggenheim museum in New York, and even the Peggy Guggenheim foundation in Venice, with its colorful past. As we will see, Chiasera engages the same system of cultural referents in his work to unfold and discern boundaries between our perception of the past and of the historic.

Marta Herford has already twice made appearances in Chiasera's work, both times in ways that find resonance in *Unter freiem Himmel*¹. The first instance was at the end of *Cornelius* (2006), a video within a video trilogy in which a costumed and masked Chiasera plays first Vincent van Gogh, then Mauritius *Cornelius* (M.C.) Escher and finally Pieter Brueghel. These videos are records of fictional journeys: Vincent is seen scaling the slopes of mount Etna; Cornelius constructs a coffin-like receptacle from sections of plaster wall at the modern art museum in Bologna, and upon entering finds himself in the Piranesian interior of Hans Schabus' mountain installation from the Venice Biennial (2005), finally emerging as a disembodied mask in Marta Herford's signature roofscape; and, after a trek through the woods, Brueghel meets his end in the catacombs of Genoa.

Rather than evoking their specific accomplishments or eccentric personalities (there is little indication as to whether the Elder or the Younger Brueghel is intended), Chiasera employs the historicity of the persona to give his videos a general, cultural familiarity. After all, we regularly find images made by these artists emblazoned on souvenir mugs, reproduced as posters, and printed on gift-wrapping paper—van Gogh's ubiquitous painting *The Starry Night* (1889) found further cultural dispersion in music through Don McLean's 1972 hit, *Vincent*. Historical accuracy is irrelevant to these consumer forms, digested, as it were, by the infinite regression of cultural mediation. The past, a growing reservoir of profound intricacy, is casually flattened into an image – a surface condition. Presented simultaneously in 2006 at Francesca Minini (Milan) and Hoet Bekaert, Ghent, *Trilogy* accepts this compression, taking it as an opportunity to revitalize the past with new narratives and parallel histories – ultimately exposing the constructed nature of “Vincent van Gogh” as a cultural figure. Through Chiasera's video, the painter gained a pastime as a mountaineer. Transposing van Gogh from his origins in the Netherlands, to the slopes of Etna, to galleries in Milan and Ghent, Chiasera exposes the tenuous authority in assignments of genre, the reliability of memory and, ultimately, in the naming of heroes.

Marta Herford's second appearance in Chiasera's work is in his *Tupacproject* (2005), a work that similarly seeks to reframe cultural meaning by shifting its contextual frame. Tupac is a study of the transformation of an object into a monument in the form of a seven-meter tall concrete statue of Tupac Amaru Shakur – the popular rapper and Black Panther supporter who was gunned down in 1996 outside the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. *Tupac*, which exists in edition, had made a tour of two urban locations: under the bridge at Via Libia in Bologna, and in front of an ethnically mixed secondary school in East London. Visiting these inner city sites allowed the statue and its pedestal to accumulate graffiti – both socially and literally inscribing Tupac's tattoos onto his concrete replica. Between 2003 and 2005, Chiasera hosted a popular online bulletin board where Tupac fans discussed their thoughts on the possibility of a Tupac monument.

The website recontextualized the physicality and site specificity of traditional monuments for globally dispersed admirers. The website, in effect, became the monumentⁱⁱ.

For Pier Luigi Tazzi, this project explores contemporary notions of risk and heroismⁱⁱⁱ, while for Lorenzo Benedetti, *Tupac* provides a “nexus” between disciplines that broadens the confines of art^{iv}. In the context of *Unter freiem Himmel*, the statue – which stands permanently in front of Marta Herford at Frank Gehry’s request – establishes a habit of viewing in the visitor, even before he or she enters the museum. Unlike Michelangelo’s David^v, which also stands precisely seven meters from the ground, *Tupac*’s upper body and face are not scaled up to compensate for the viewer’s foreshortened perspective directly beneath it. One must stand at a distance from *Tupac* to see his figure in its entirety. The viewer’s physical position in relation to the statue enables a dialogic act of seeing, whereby the viewer’s movement is implicated in the construction of the work’s meaning. In other words, the changing spatial relationship between viewer and statue is central to the experience of it as a critique of traditional monuments and heroes. Like the iconic entry trellis of James Stirling’s Neue Staatsgalerie (Stuttgart, 1983), or even C.S. Lewis’ old wardrobe leading to Narnia, *Tupac* is a threshold that activates our faculties, and calibrates them into instruments for intellectualizing the experience of space. Our bodies are sensitized for active viewing upon entering the first galleries of *Unter freiem Himmel*: jagged peaks of an indoor mountain range reach towards the ceiling; banks that, together with the soaring curves of Gehry’s walls, produce deep, indomitable canyons. A mottled, weathered grey (like *Tupac*’s concrete complexion), the sides of the mountain are assembled from large angular planes of painted jute canvas stretched and glued to wooden frames. Its form, inestimable by sight alone, demands that the viewer trace its contours by foot. Moving inside the hollow structure, the mountain’s imposing size becomes apparent: like the interior of an underground cavern, dark and vast, scale is perceived as our footfalls produce echoes.

Yve-Alain Bois recounts a similar physics of apprehension in Richard Serra’s large sculptural works in his essay, *A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara*. He also retells Serra’s criticism of many floor-based minimalist sculptures produced in the late 1960s, mainly for their reliance on the floor to provide a canvas-like plane on which the sculpture is pictorially viewed^{vi}. Serra shunned the role of photographic documentation in large sculptural work (like Land Art), faulting it for providing a ‘Gestalt reading’ that denied the work its temporality and reconstructs it “as the indifferent realization of a composition *a priori*.”^{vii} He advocates instead a sculptural experience established by the multiplicity of views offered by “the dialectic of walking and looking.” It is the presence of the body – its senses, its ability to physically remember – that allows this work to resonate with viewers.

Though the relationship between the body and architecture has its traditions in Vitruvius, who compared the human body directly to the body of the building,^{viii} architecture theorists today generally see the experience of architecture as something that resists pure conceptualization – “it is not linked to an ultimate meaning that could be recuperated intellectually.”^{ix} Robert Smithson reminds us that critical perception is engaged only when we “trust more in the real movement of the legs than in the fictive movement of [our] gaze.”^x At the same time, architectural perception, unlike the perception of natural environments, is always a combination of empirical and rational logic. Our physical experience of a space must always take into account the intention of its existence (ie. why did the architect build this?).^{xi} With *Unter freiem Himmel – Berg* the intentions of the architect (Gehry) and those of the artist (Chiasera) are inseparable. Taking formal and scalar attributes from its architectural context – chameleon-like – it is as if Chiasera’s mountain colonized the gallery’s existing architectural intentions, and repurposed them as elements in its aesthetic fold. Gehry’s Bilbao Guggenheim suffers a similar fate. There, Serra’s eight rolled-steel installations commandeer an entire wing of the museum – the building’s shape and size seemingly the

resulting effect of the artist's demands.

If *Unter freiem Himmel – Berg* sets our bodies in motion, it's in the *Wald* where our thoughts are invited to wander into the recesses of our cultural imagination. Hung on top of tree silhouettes painted onto the museum's walls are framed gouache paintings, each depicting the fictional friends of the *Trilogy* in various groupings, situations and often in various stages of their demise. In Western folklore, the woods are often imbued with an otherworldly enchantment, and it is in this milieu that we encounter Vincent, Cornelius and Pieter. When seen outdoors, they are often in a mountainous landscape, ashen and sparsely vegetated – the sky a matte, featureless expanse. In one painting, Cornelius is sitting in a coffin holding a snake that is biting its own tail. In another, he lies dead on a block, naked, while a griffin-like creature extracts Pieter's decapitated head from a hole in his belly. In yet another, Cornelius is found unconscious on the same grey precipice, pinned down by a wolf that is feeding on his gut. Vincent is seen as a disembodied head, floating in the flames of a nearby pyre. Death does not become every image – Vincent is seen elsewhere pondering a checkerboard ramp in front of a yellow house. Pieter, rendered in sepia tones, sits on the mountain, rapt in contemplation of a Sephirot – a Kabbalistic symbol depicting the ten manifested attributes of God. Clearly, an esoteric logic is at work in these pictures: a cycle of multiple deaths, suggesting an equal number of rebirths, is symbolized by the self-devouring snake, the symbol of eternal recurrence in alchemy. Chiasera evokes the mystic dimensions of religion (the Sephirot, floating head, etc.) while revealing aspects of the internal logic of his own mind: the checkerboard pattern, as we remember, was used to destroy the statues in *Forget the Heroes*. Once noticed, the pattern's habitual appearance throughout his oeuvre becomes a symbol of obsession – infinitely repeatable and eternally recurring.

Diving into his own symbology, Chiasera resurfaces with these images as evidence of psychological depths. Together, the *Wald* pictures are a collection of fragments, partial curves of an imagination that never join into the contours of a story. Denied of clear, consistent referents, any sense of fulfillment requires the viewer to produce their own conclusions – to access whatever associations and knowledge they might have of these artist-characters (recall again the souvenir mugs, the wrapping paper), and to patch the fragments together into a semblance of the historical figure. One experiences a revelatory awareness that history is always a willful fabrication of the past. History is an arbitrary resurrection of moments, an abbreviation of the countless possible permutations of a narrative past. As in *Trilogy*, Chiasera relies on the fact that van Gogh, Escher and Brueghel are artists whose significance in our general knowledge far outstrips our curiosity for the details of their lives. Anthony Giddens attributes the interchangeability between the past (anytime before the present) and the historical (pertaining to the events of the past) to the way the high-modern subject sees lifespan as a unit of time. Our reliance on tradition and the continuity of generations weakened as our individual agency strengthened via powerful new means of communication, movement and production. In other words, Vincent, Cornelius and Pieter may as well have known each other, since they are all from the past.

These images, then, always address us twice: first in depicting the three artists and their charades, then once again in revealing the constructed nature of history. Roland Barthes calls this double system of signification “myth” – the instrumental or connotative usage of cultural material the way Marta Herford utilized Frank Gehry's style to imply a potential relationship to other cultural institutions. The mythic system, a meta-language that we all understand, requires the primary signifier (say, van Gogh) to be drained of meaning in order to absorb its concept (the randomness of history)^{xiii}. Like Haynes' staging of Dylan's symbolic death, the actual lives of Chiasera's artists are put at a distance so that they stand

as shells, filled with purpose only when we recognize them as actors performing the arbitrary forms of historical signification. What we gain is “less reality than a certain knowledge of reality.”^{xiv} Andrea Viliani, in his text about the *Trilogy*, formulates this mythic reality as an expression of “personal projections and obsession,” allowing us to “overcome the spatial and temporal distance between [us and] those subjects and feel closer to them and their everyday thoughts and needs.^{xv} Collapsing the space and time between us and van Gogh, and becoming intimate with his “everyday thoughts and needs,” is tantamount to eradicating the necessity of *writing* history for the past to remain an active and discursive dimension of the present. The past exists insofar as the signifiers, the trappings we attribute it with remain meaningful.

This analysis sits well until we suspect that Chiasera has woven strands of *biblical time* within his fabric of the past and the historical. There are fifteen paintings in the “forest,” as many as there are Catholic Stations of the Cross (including the Resurrection)—this particular equivalence in ambulatory cadence recalls a physical, instinctive sensation of devotion. Whereas the stations represent biblical moments made eternal by the grace of God, Chiasera’s images are likewise atemporal scenes. Furthermore, the setting for many of these images, arid hillocks and crumbly flat plains, recalls not only the shape and color of the “mountain,” but also Giotto’s famous depiction of Mount Alverno – on top of which Saint Francis received his stigmata. Part of a cycle of 13th-century frescoes in the upper chapel of the Saint Francis Basilica in Assisi, the image correlates the landscape (Mount Alverno), and the body (Saint Francis) with the *ineffable* (the seraph)^{xvi}. Saint Francis, after a period of self-seclusion and meditational prayer on the mountain, received the stigmata of Christ from a seraph. A defining moment in Saint Francis’ life, Giotto pins the image’s main elements to the corners of an inverted equilateral triangle: the peak of the mountain at the triangle’s top-left, the face of the seraph at the top-right, and Saint Francis at the bottom, his left knee genuflected in supplication. Other scenes in the Christian pictorial tradition recall a similar affinity between the body, the landscape and the holy (the Resurrection, the parting of the Red Sea, etc.), but the stigmatization stands alone in that the relationship between holy inflictor and earthly inflicted is visually represented by rays connecting the two. In Giotto’s image, it is as if either the seraph possessed lasers on its hands and feet that aim correspondingly to Saint Francis’ appendages, or alternatively, that he’s a marionette animated by chords in the hands of a heavenly master. In any case, we are presented with an attitude towards the nature of our body as a receptacle and a repository for aesthetic intake. Is the artist suggesting that our bodies *produce* meaning in the physical perception of the “mountain,” and *receive* it in the intellectual realm of the “forest?” The last few paragraphs have certainly made a case for this interpretation. Yet Chiasera has made clear in several instances that his interest lies not in the direct formulation of didactic concepts, but in reaching towards the concept’s core through cataloguing its eventual ruin – the evidence of thinking’s entropic nature, the “fragments and erosion of [the] cognitive process.”

This kernel finds clear expression in *Archivio Zarathustra* (2009), a sprawling endeavor that has thus far traveled to Frankfurt and Prague as it continues to develop. *Zarathustra*, like the images from *Wald*, is a study of signification’s associative nature, and the mutability of meaning. Like words spun out from a thinker’s mind, the piece documents the movement of a single thought through a collection of drawings, photographs and other ephemera. Chiasera began with two black and white photographs, one of Friedrich Nietzsche and the other of art historian Aby Warburg, both of whom are shown in deep thought, their heads resting on their hands. Their downcast looks lead Chiasera to muse on Albrecht Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, the German printmaker’s much debated 1514 image. Then, research began on Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, the authors of “Saturn and Melancholy” and former Warburg assistants. The essay, which was a geometric and mathematical analysis of *Melancholia I*, focused on the truncated

cube floating on the left side of the image. Besides being led tangentially to an investigation of magic squares, Chiasera also recognized the shape as similar to the rock in Sils-Maria that Nietzsche sat upon when the ancient idea of eternal return struck him as something which would later become central to his work. Assembling the images and drawings of these ideas onto large boards, Chiasera then had them photographed by Serge Domangie, the Uffizi Gallery's official photographic archivist. Afterwards, the boards, held together in a massive wooden frame, were set aflame in front of a building owned by an art collector in Frankfurt. The ashes were collected, and placed inside an iron receptacle – shaped like the truncated cube from Dürer's engraving. Finally, the iron container and archival photographic prints of the boards were exhibited in a gallery in Prague. In addition to the shifting perceptual frames operating within this piece, *Zarathustra* demonstrates a high-modern, internet-age mode of thinking. The archive is at once encapsulated in the iron container, like websites on a monitor, endlessly unfolding in a succession of Wikipedia links. Few will argue against the fact that Google, the Internet hegemon of search engines, has equalized and smoothed over the shape of hierarchies and the articulations of power that have built up the Western historical context thus far. Bob Dylan, Vincent van Gogh, Aby Warburg – and Paolo Chiasera – their work, their thoughts, their lives' vicissitudes are all available at a fraction of a second's disposal. Order, influence and provenance give way to scattershot facts, their former significance made trivial by the effortless retrieval.

And despite the limitlessness of referents intermingling, unrestricted by historical chronology, the deliverance offered by both *Zarathustra* and *Unter freiem Himmel* – their seduction – is one ultimately met with grim pleasure: like our searching gaze into the expanding cosmos, our access to information is restrained by the final and insurmountable limitations of comprehension. What do we gain from this journey through the ruin of our own intellectual and technological defeat? How can we retrieve an experience of art from the Google-flattened fields of indifference and dispersion? In speaking of Giovanni Michelucci's *Church of the Freeway of the Sun* (1963) – which with its tangled, branch-like columns supporting a heavy, undulating concrete roof, looks like a hybrid of a “mountain” and a “forest” – Chiasera mentioned that its visual impact from the A1 motorway outside of Florence constitutes an alternative form of perception. Situated next to the flow of speeding cars, the church appears as “something that flashes before your eyes so quickly you almost don't have time to take it in.”^{xviii} A condensation of form and color, as well as intention and ideology, the church appears as a flicker in our perception, evading the deadening hold of rational analysis that so much art finds comfort and validation in. We have here a thing that is immune to decay – a thing that evolves the moment it vanishes and renews with every passing.

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- ⁱ Perhaps a reference to the fact that each of the five additional Gehry designed galleries feature skylights.
- ⁱⁱ Hip-hop musicians seem particularly adept at transcending the limitations of physicality. Notorious B.I.G., Big Punisher, Eazy-E as well as Tupac, have all released albums posthumously that in some cases have outsold their earthly efforts.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Pier Luigi Tazzi, “Heroes”, Paolo Chiasera: Tupacproject, London: Limehouse Arts Foundation, 2007.
- ^{iv} Lorenzo Benedetti, “Monuments on the Move”, Paolo Chiasera: Tupacproject, London: Limehouse Arts Foundation, 2007.
- ^v The David statue, like Tupac, can be understood as a frame through which its context is measured. Unlike Tupac’s peripatetic movement, David’s presence is registered through its continuous replication. Even in Florence, there are two.
- ^{vi} Yve-Alain Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara”, translated by John Shepley, October 29, Summer 1984.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- ^{viii} Vitruvius, *De architectura*, book III, chapter 1.
- ^{ix} Alberto Pérez-Gómez, “The Space of Architecture: Meaning as presence and representation,” in *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, ed. S. Holl, J. Pallasmaa, A. Pérez-Gómez, Architecture and Urbanism, Special Issue July 1994, a+u Publishing Tokyo.
- ^x Yve-Alain Bois, p. 36.
- ^{xi} *ibid.*, p. 41.
- ^{xii} Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late-Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991. p. 144-149.
- ^{xiii} Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” from *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.
- ^{xiv} *ibid.*
- ^{xv} Andrea Viliani, “Vincent, Cornelius, Pieter: Inside Paolo’s Brain”, in: Paolo Chiasera, *The Trilogy: Cornelius*, Exhibition catalogue Museo d’Arte Moderna di Bologna, Bologna 2006.
- ^{xvi} Fifth century theologian Dionysius the Areopagite wrote in chapter seven of his *Celestial Hierarchy* that seraphs, the highest order of angels, indicate a “ceaseless and eternal revolution about Divine Principles.” With their “enlightening power,” they dispel and destroy the shadows of darkness. On the other hand, cherubs, second to seraphs, represent “an abundance of knowledge or an outflowing of wisdom.” It can be said that seraphs embody a power beyond knowledge.
- ^{xvii} Stefano Boeri and Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Intervista: in conversation with Paolo Chiasera”, Paolo Chiasera: Tupacproject, London: Limehouse Arts Foundation, 2007.