

PAOLO CHIASERA

Interviewed in London in May 2007

Hans Ulrich Obrist:

A monument? An urban project? I wonder, did Tupac see himself as an urban thinker and what would he think of the way the project was organized?

Paolo Chiasera:

The TUPAC PROJECT consists of the construction of a monument dedicated to Tupac Amaru Shakur, the Black Panther rapper who died in '96 in a Las Vegas gang feud.

I wanted to try to create an alternative map of the world, using as a basis the ideas behind – or, at any rate, what has become known as – “underground culture”.

The statue is made of concrete, rising from the street, as if an earthquake had pushed it up from its roots; it's a life-size classical statue of Tupac, whose own life led him far from the straight and narrow path of the kind of person such monuments normally celebrate. It was initially placed on a 5-metre-high concrete pedestal in front of the new Frank Gehry Museum in Germany, in an exhibition entitled *(my private) Heroes* (MARTa, Herford 2005). The height of the pedestal accentuated the distance between the public and the “hero”, but the fact that it was displayed outside the museum and the circular white pedestal (ideal for graffiti!) suggested a certain openness and approachability.

The statue became the focal point of an internet site, www.tupacproject.it, designed to generate a network exploring the possibility of creating a monument to our own times, a monument that would create dialogue, through the writings on the pedestal, extended on the website. It was then that I decided to give the statue a home in Bologna, in an unauthorized “underground” site, a kind of hall of fame under the bridge in Via Libia: a private gallery for young artists of the quarter.

This project was therefore created outside the circuits of the art world and the media, away from the usual places where statues celebrate long-dead celebrities. I like to imagine that if Dr. Dre came to Bologna, he would probably feel more at home in Via Libia or under the Cavallazzi bridge than in Piazza Maggiore or the city's other historic and monumental sites.

The statue is currently in a secondary school in East London, where 40% of the students are black, 40% white and 20% mixed race, mostly of Asian origin – a real melting pot. Hopefully they will interact with the sculpture in their playground for the next three months.

There will also be workshops, run from the internet site.

The aim is to extend the concept of the contemporary monument, to make it interact with its environment, eroding, renouncing the unchanging face of bronze for vulnerable concrete and the dissolution of memory.

People can do what they like with it: change it, destroy it, reject it. A kind of monument on wheels is how I like to imagine myths should be celebrated in our time.

Monuments are intrinsically linked to the idea of history and historical acceptance. When that sense of historical distance is missing, dialogue and acceptance are needed to redress the balance.

Stefano Boeri:

I think that's very interesting... Roland Barthes wrote about this, the historical construction, the self-determining monument is what it is and how it should be seen.

The renegade monument is not particularly new – all monuments have their authors and are the result of some form of organization. The point is whether monuments make sense anymore and if

so, do we need to display them in “appropriate” places and should they be tangible, material? Or is it that a monument might be all the more powerful if it is immaterial and uncertain, with no relationship to the site and the physical?

Firstly, our cities are full of monuments of all types, monuments that don’t want to be monuments, anti-monuments, non-monuments.

The second important question that Paolo raised is to do with underground culture today: where is it and what is it exactly? I think this is a subject that needs to be discussed, because I myself have doubts about whether what we call underground culture today can be found on the streets, in the suburbs, on the margins of society, among the ethnic minorities. I don’t know – I make no bones about it – but I have my doubts. Certainly there are interesting things going on there, but if by underground we mean a network of cultural units that are operating outside of contemporary culture systems, then the suburbs are not at all underground, they are firmly on the inside of contemporary culture, aspirations, the “in” places, youth politics, cultural politics.

There is an underground reality today that can be seen in what could be described as supra-institutional environments, within TV and politics.

The whole concept of underground has become hackneyed and needs a clean sweep with a new broom. If we really want monuments, perhaps we should be thinking about these “new undergrounds”. Perhaps we should be thinking about how to monumentalize TV and politics.

There are artists who are trying to create powerful works from within these institutional undergrounds. A case in point is Francesco Vezzoli. You may or may not like his work, but what he is trying to do is interesting. Personally, I like some of his works, others less so, but this is the area he’s working in, opening a dialogue about the underground scene in Italy, from within supra-institutional networks, about second-generation representation, not the tangible.

HUO:

How do you see yourself in relation to the underground scene?

PC:

I’d just like to clarify something first about contemporary monuments. The fragmentary nature of the monument was mentioned, something which I think comes about in two ways – one, the Thomas Hirschhorn approach, is a cluster of a thousand particles that create a sense of confusion, leaving you in a kind of schizophrenic daze. From the thousand images, you create your own personal reaction from the chain reaction generated.

My approach is different: I like to think that nowadays a monument can be perceived the way we see Michelucci’s church from the A1 motorway in Florence, something that flashes before your eyes so quickly you almost don’t have time to take it in – almost.

The flash can be achieved by speed or by “condensation”.

The Tupac statue was made in the classical style, but, using concrete, I condensed a set of meanings, of cultural layers which previously, in the work of Thomas Hirschhorn for example, remained on the surface.

So, in terms of fragmentation, I’m more interested in condensation.

Coming back to the underground, what interests me, more than counter-information or the development networks that the underground may have in the centre, in the suburbs and so on, is the ability to create an alphabet which is absolutely hermetic compared to the standard language – airport English.

Underground means crew, or group – a set of people who recognize one another by means of symbols, sometimes hermetic; gestures, tags, expressions that are perhaps absolutely paradoxical

and unbelievable. Just as we see Francesco Vezzoli's icons flash by on TV, but they are never deconstructed into a condensed image, they remain, perhaps like *Caligula*, the façade of what might be.

I like to plunge right down into the depths of these icons, till I come to a way of looking at the world that is absolutely biased, daring, personal and emotional.

If modernism is a kind of candle that illuminates upwards towards the horizon, which gives human beings, sitting on top of their empire, a feeling of security, then today the candle has turned upside down, it burns itself and its own history, illuminating what is vertically below it, or a bit obliquely if you like, opening up new vistas.

What I find interesting in the underground is this freefall to a place where communications can be deconstructed.

HUO:

This leads me to another interesting question – the aesthetics of resistance. And that brings us to Gramsci in a certain sense. Stefano, you've just been to the Cini Gramsci museum for a major conference and the Gramsci aspect is found also in some of your videos. Is there such a thing as an aesthetics of resistance?

SB:

I was in Tehran and there was a large exhibition on resistance promoted by a fundamentalist group. There was one floor about the mythology of Che Guevara, and another about contemporary Islam... this is something which should now be looked at with light-heartedness.

It has to be seen in context, in its historical context.

I don't think there is an aesthetics of resistance beyond a keen awareness of which resistance we are talking about, because if it's the resistance of Islamic fundamentalists to demands by young Iranians, then it's very much open to question whether that can develop an interesting aesthetic – Iranian artists and graphic designers have worked in this way, crudely and heavy-handedly, although the ideological imagery is all hammers and sickles, Che Guevara, etc. Context is everything.

PC:

I'd like to mention a video I made, *YOUNG DICTATORS' VILLAGE* (2004), where nine young people changed their lifestyle, their way of dressing and where they lived, to try to bridge the gap between themselves and a dictator of their choice.

They divided into groups along ideological lines, setting up a community in a disused farmhouse on the outskirts of Bologna. They fought, raided and destroyed what they could to feed their dictatorial instincts.

These young people had no historical memory to speak of, they were merely living out a horizontal aesthetic fascination with symbols and iconoclasm. Symbols that, as if thrown into water, blended together, sinking, rising again, creating new identities, schizoid, up to a point. This video shows how impossible it is to create an aesthetics of resistance.

SB:

The web site www.paolochiasera.org was set up... as happens all too often the images should be left to speak for themselves, this monument to Tupac is great, a really strong statement – and that is enough. There's no need to talk about it. Silence at times can be a powerful tool, with extraordinary

strength. Trying to describe it is no use: every word added erases, destroys, hides, deletes. This is, I think, a wonderful thing.

HUO:

You spoke of the self-destructive aspect of art as a temporary phase. Here we are in England, the “home” of Gustav Metzger, the founder of self-destructive art. Can you tell me more about this aspect, and is there a link with Metzger?

PC:

What interests me about destruction in this case is the possibility of reconstruction. The Tupac monument, through being experienced and discussed by people, will undergo transformations just as formative as my input in constructing and locating it.

When you work on what might be a modern simulacrum – a potent image – it can never belong totally to you.

Personally, I’m interested in creating my own point of view and exploring my relationship with the world, sometimes using “inadequate systems”. This is part of my heritage, my Italianness. Think of Calvino who, in *The Baron in the Trees*, to explore the idea of the nobility, climbs a tree and constructs an amazing metaphor for the world and how life can be lived.

The relationship with the art-object is forged with my cultural potentialities.

Since the monument came to London, I’ve been interested to see how the English, or the immigrant communities, react to it, reworking the piece in their discussions.

You spoke earlier of Lawrence Weiner, and at times art is also a language.

HUO:

London is the most polyglot city in the world. In collaboration with the Serpentine Gallery we did a project in a school in Pennington where about 70 languages are spoken. This is another aspect of the project. What does it mean to you to take this project to a global city, or – as Eduard Glissant would say – a city of mondialité?

PC:

For me it’s an acceleration and opens up the possibility of a new project. The possibility of a project, the possibility of a museum, of a work, an idea, is, I think, always a mixture of different dimensions, the local and the universal.

Speaking about your own cultural roots, you can communicate with the world.

I’m not at all interested in explosions of internationalism. I like to think that coming to London means adding something to this sculpture, while expressing something of the landscape and memory that shaped it. It was made in Italy and derives from an Italian experience.

All of my work revolves around the idea of the power of the group and the loss of control.

At a formal level, I always use classical geometric forms – circles, squares, triangles, with implosive central perspective. This gives me a visual perception of Italy and the Italians. Taking this project to London simply means exporting my mindset.

HUO:

Tupac is the protagonist of this project, visible or invisible, Tupac the hero, Tupac the catalyst. Why him?

PC:

I chose Tupac – beyond my own personal feelings for him – because the fact that he was a freedom fighter fascinates me.

Tupac, through his father, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, and his mother, Afeni Shakur, was a member of the Black Panthers. All his life he fought for the human rights of black people. Tupac was therefore an ideal bridge between a ghettoized dimension, such as underground culture, and an absolutely universal dimension, such as the right to freedom and free expression. In that sense, he is relevant to any situation.

HUO:

“Art for all”, speaking of Tupac as a hero, I’d like to hear something about your own heroes in art, the inspiration behind the Tupac project and your work in general.

PC:

Hmm, let me think.

HUO:

Boetti? Gericault?

PC:

The problem is that they’re all connected, aren’t they? You mentioned Gericault and I think of a kind of raft that carries me over the stormy Boetti.

The whole process is so fast, everything is included, it would be over-analytical to try to list private heroes, but Gericault and Boetti are certainly important.

HUO:

What are your next projects going to be?

PC:

Recently I’ve been working on a 16-mm film about Tarkovsky and his funeral rite – once again raising the issue of the group and its mysterious formation in commemoration of a hero. Coming back to your previous question by the way, Tarkovsky is way up there with my private heroes. During Tarkovsky’s funeral, Rostropovich played Bach. I wanted to contact him to ask him to play it again, but now he’s gone too. But every situation, every journey opens up new roads.

HUO:

What about the future?

PC:

I could answer by quoting Lacan: “the signified is a stone in the mouth of the signifier”.