Grand Master Crash[1]

Reflections on the Forget the Heroes project (2008) by Paolo Chiasera.

I. Prologue

In his book *Die Schrift an der Wand* (1967), the German cultural critic Günther Anders reflected amongst other things on the still highly controversial problems concerning monuments and urged: "No more monuments should be erected, but objects should be adopted as monuments." And indeed Günther Anders was as wary of the act of making monuments as he was of this act lending support to memory. He went so far as to ask: "Are there still any monuments that bring to mind some particular person or day when one looks at them?"[2]

In many ways, modern art shares the pessimism expressed by Günther Anders and it reacts in a whole variety of manners. In this brief introduction, it will suffice to mention three particularly indicative examples. First of all, the work of the German conceptual sculptor and photographer Jochen Gerz, whose *Harburger Mahnmal gegen Faschismus* [*Harburg Monument against Fascism*], which he created in 1986 together with Esther Shalev-Gerz, is emblematic of this vision. The work was initially a 12-metre-tall column clad in a thin surface of sheet metal, on which visitors could inscribe their signature to declare their opposition to fascism and neo-fascism. As soon as one part of the column was entirely covered in signatures, it was gradually lowered into the ground. Today, the monument is totally invisible, for it has completely sunk out of sight. The *Harburg Monument against Fascism* was in a certain sense destroyed precisely by the active participation of people. In the basic aesthetic project, eternal monumentality is thus superseded by a level of transitoriness that relies on the power of interaction – and this a power that is capable of triggering off memories.

Other examples of monuments that dissolve and disintegrate can be found in the works of artists like Gustav Metzger, whose "self-destroying art" can be clearly seen in his *Modell eines autodestruktiven Monuments* [*Model of a Self-Destroying Monument*] (1960). Or in Felix Gonzales-Torres, whose *Untitled (Ross)* (1991) is a typical example of this trend: it is a sort of minimalist geometrical sculpture set up by the artist in a corner of the gallery with a pile of sweets, the weight of which is equal to that of his companion Ross, who died after contracting AIDS. Visitors to the exhibition are invited to take these sweets and make them disappear by sucking on them. Through this gesture, the weight of the sculpture gradually diminishes until it is reduced to nothing. *Untitled (Ross)* thus fully takes up the idea formulated by Günther Anders, and it is also a monument to transience. Rather than being an unalterable monumental work, "it adopts things as monuments".

On the following pages I shall attempt to show how to Paolo Chiasera's *Forget the Heroes* (2008) also acts through the dialectic of an evident and self-dematerialising formula, with the aim of highlighting the precarious state of both memory and monument, as well as of vision and reality.

II. Spatial (Dis)order

Forget the Heroes is an installation that stretches across three galleries. In the first gallery of MACRO – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma, a four-channel loop video projection shows how four sculptures (monuments of Adam Smith, Le Corbusier, Seymour Cray and Noam Chomsky, which we shall look at more closely in the next section) are destroyed. The second gallery is fitted out like a warehouse, in which almost everything that was used for working on this project is shown to the public. The focal point of this gallery is a steep white and black ramp on which the four works were destroyed after being made to turn by a machine. In actual fact, the monuments were disintegrated bit by bit, gradually being damaged by contact with the hard surface of the ramp as they rotated. Amongst other objects, there is also the worktable on which the sculptures were first created. In this second gallery we can also see 15 drawings, including the technical construction blueprints and portraits of the four people mentioned. In the last gallery there is a new abstract-biomorphic type of sculpture made in a style that recalls that of the Italian sculptor Leonardo Leoncillo. This was ultimately made using the materials recovered from the four sculptures that were destroyed. Instead of resting on a pedestal, the sculpture is placed on a pallet, which gives it mobility and makes it ready to go on a journey outside of the *white cube* (Brian O'Doherty[3]) of the Museum in order to enter the *real* world of real life. With this unusual concatenation of the three galleries, the *sacred* space of the museum tends to shed its authority as a temple of sublime and eternal, and becomes more of a workshop and monitor on which we can follow the process of creation, destruction and rebirth.

III. Crash the Ideas

The four sculptures mentioned above are thus in a way similar to traditional monuments and they are undoubtedly figurative representations, as *realistic* portraits of four important personalities. This type of traditional representation also recalls the days when the power of a monument had not yet become trivialised by media frenzy, or by fleeting perception and post-modern indifferentism. What puts these four personalities on a par, apart from their fame, is mainly that their theories, which were "launched as utopia, generated different results with respect to the promise", as Paolo Chiasera himself effectively explained in a document on the *Forget the Heroes* project. Despite all the differences that emanate from the diversity of the various contexts, these results undoubtedly have something in common. And this means that Adam Smith's observations on the economy are unfortunately still valid in today's age of neo-liberalism, while Le Corbusier's approach to architecture has in practice been perverted in modernist constructions. And while it is plain to see that the development of Seymour Cray's supercomputer still has great influence today, from certain points of view the same could be said of Noam Chomsky's generative linguistics, even though his fame at the present time is more based on his role as a political intellectual in the face of globalisation. But, as Paolo Chiasera sums up in the document on the project, the exhibition is also designed "to show the crash of the theories formulated in each field". The destruction of the four monuments thus reveals a dual code. On the one hand it alludes to the way in which the status of monuments in the (post)-modern era has changed, and to the fact that representative monumentality and its ability to ensure the indestructibility of memory are now impossible. On the other, the destruction also

reflects on a phenomenon that has occurred all too often during the course of history: in the world of real artistic materialisation, emancipatory thought is deformed and downgraded to the point where it becomes anything but a *utopian improvement*. The next and final section will examine in greater detail this tendency and the theory formulated by the artist.

First of all, we need to examine the destiny of the four monuments within the context of the installation. As we have seen, after being totally destroyed, these works experience a *resurrection*, coming back to life in the form of an abstract sculpture. The moment of abstraction quotes visions that are typical of the so-called "avant-gardes" of the past century and, as a result, we also witness their doubts about the ability of aesthetics to represent something that is alien to the world of art. The result of this scepticism about monuments is naturally of immense scope. And also the monuments by Jochen Gerz, Gustav Metzger and Felix Gonzales-Torres, which I mentioned earlier, are maintained within the confines of abstract aesthetics. At the same time, the circumstance in which this new abstract sculpture rests on a mobile pallet heralds a further metamorphosis: the work strives to break free from the sphere of art and, to a certain extent, becomes *fleeting* and *fast*. This is presaged by the actual destruction of the four realistic monuments which, even before they reach the *public* to be perceived as such, have already disappeared again. The concept is clearly expressed by the trenchant words of the artist himself, in this final quotation: "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."[4]

IV.

To conclude, I should like to return to the way Paolo Chiasera understands the interactions between history and power, social groups, and the loss of control. The history and power of a highly influential personality, who owes his authoritativeness to the strength of his ideas and utopias, generally culminates in the status of an icon. The artist and person thus becomes a legendary figure to be imitated. But the destiny of this transformation is that social groups and constellations of society take over this icon and his works, and develop these ideas in a second-rate, sketchy fashion. The problematic result of this process is a loss of control that quite commonly leads to a dilution of these concepts and ideas of the world which were once so revolutionary. Paolo Chiasera perceives that this engenders a legend that is only a shadow of its original postulate.

This theme, which I have just referred to, constantly returns in the work of Paolo Chiasera, who has always tackled it in an effective manner and in different ways. One need only think of his *Tupac-Project* (2004 – 2007),[5] as well as on the Internet,[6] or of *The Following Days* (2005)[7] and later of his *Trilogy: Vincent, Cornelius, Pieter* (2006),[8] but especially his impulsive video installation, *Young Dictator's Village* (2004). What is decisive in all these works, and naturally also in the *Forget the Heroes* project, is the way they examine historical and legendary personalities and the potential for visionary identification that they hold for us contemporaries. The fact that other people can identify with them is one of the particular characteristics of these *Heroes*. And from this point of view, the operation of remembering, critically examining and reflecting on the history of these icons is an essential need. It is on a par with that of forgetting and recoiling from the dead weight of that which is merely historical and which prevents us from acting in a way that is appropriate for our present circumstances. It is precisely this dialectic that

forms the foundations of Paolo Chiasera's aesthetics. And one can sense the presence of Friedrich Nietzsche and his thoughts – which are still highly topical today – *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1873- 1874)!

Raimar Stange

1 Freely adapted from the US hip-hop band Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five.
2 All the quotations are taken from: Günther Anders, *Die Schrift an der Wand*. Munich, 1967, p. 238.
3 Cf. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*. San Francisco, 1986.
4 Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Stefano Boeri. In: Paolo Chiasera, *Tupacproject*. Catalogue. London, 2007, p. 7.
5 Cf. Raimar Stange, "Das Tupac-Monument". In: *(my private) Heroes*. Catalogue edited by Jan Hoet. Herford, 2005, p. 86.
6 www.tupacproject.it
7 Cf. also: Lorenzo Benedetti, "Movements on the Move". In: *loc. cit.* note 4, p. 4 and ff.
8 See also: Paolo Chiasera, *The Trilogy: Cornelius*. Catalogue, Bologna, 2006.