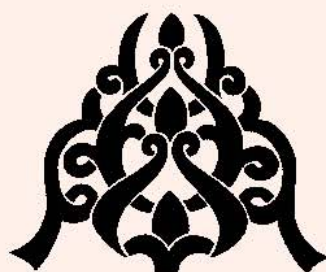


Gian Carlo Pagliasso

DÉJÀ CHIMERA

SAGGI/ WRITINGS 1987-1990



Editions d'Afrique du Nord

Il libro di saggi di GIAN CARLO PAGLIASSO, *Déjà Chimera: Saggi 1987-1990* articola lo sviluppo poetico e teoretico di un momento artistico storicamente incentrato su un'ontologia "debole". In realtà, le indicazioni di percorso, anche quando possono essere riferibili a questa intenzione, nascondono un altro senso più impellente. Si tratta di abbozzare la possibilità teorica di leggere la problematica artistica come metafora della condizione del soggetto nell'epoca dell'estetizzazione globale del Capitalismo e della società odierna.

In questo senso, i saggi qui contenuti sono solo una premessa da sviluppare in seguito in direzione di una nuova prospettiva sulla soggettività — al di là dei limiti impressi a quest'ultima dall'idea marxiana di soggetto rivoluzionario fino al dibattito postmoderno in generale. La conclusione parziale dell'autore, che individua una componente metapsicotica nell'opera d'arte di fine secolo, si dimensiona a specchio della condizione particolare (la "chimera" del titolo) in cui versano oggi la coscienza (di classe) del singolo e la sua comprensione sociale.

GIAN CARLO PAGLIASSO è nato il 24 giugno 1949, a Torino. Diplomato in Scenografia presso l'Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti di Torino nel 1973 e laureato in Filosofia all'Università di Torino nel 1975. Direttore dello Studio 16/e dal 1975 al 1990. Fondatore nel 1976 del Gruppo di Ricerca materialistica (G.R.M.) con cui ha prodotto interventi, installazioni e *performances* in Europa e Stati Uniti dal 1977 al 1984. Dal 1985, teorico e artista del movimento dell'Arte Debole con cui ha esposto in gallerie e musei europei e americani sino al 1996. Direttore della Galleria e agenzia d'arte FIGURE dal 1997.

GIAN CARLO PAGLIASSO's book of essays, *Déjà Chimera: Writings 1987-1990* articulates the theoretical and poetical development of an artistic moment in history predicated upon a "weak" ontology. However, all the overt signs actually refer to a hidden but still wider directive. At stake, here, is the theoretical possibility of considering the practice of art as a metaphor for the state of the Subject in an age of the global estheticization of Capitalism and contemporary Society as a whole.

In this sense, the essays delineate merely a premise that might become the ground for a new perspective on Subjectivity — one that would go beyond the Marxist borders of a proletarian revolution and the postmodern debate in general. In so far as Gian Carlo Pagliasso espies a metapsychotic dimension in the work of art today, his partial conclusion may reflect the marginality or particularity (evidenced in the operative concept of the "chimera") that now belongs to the (class) consciousness of the individual and the Social within an overriding paradigm.

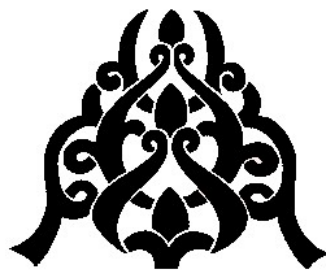
GIAN CARLO PAGLIASSO was born on June 24, 1949, in Turin (Italy). He received a degree in Scenography at the Accademia Albertina of Fine Arts in Turin in 1973, and a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Turin in 1975. In 1976, he founded G.R.M. (Group for Materialistic Research), for which he has produced various interventions, installations, and performances both in Europe and the United States from 1977 until 1984. From 1985 until 1996, he was an artist and theoretician of the movement Arte Debole (Weak Art), with which he did many gallery and museum exhibitions both in America and Europe. Since 1997, he has been the director of the art gallery FIGURE in Turin (Italy). *Déjà Chimera: Writings 1987-1990* is the author's first book of collected essays.

Gian Carlo Pagliasso

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SAGGI/ WRITINGS 1987-1990

With a Translation from the Italian
by Peter Carravetta



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DÉJÀ CHIMERA: SAGGI/WRITINGS 1987-1990
BY GIAN CARLO PAGLIASSO.

TRANSLATION BY PETER CARRAVETTA.

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[See Essay by P. Carravetta, below]

Preface

The publication in English of this collection of texts, written from 1987 to 1990, affords me the possibility to clarify the nature of their origin and their relevance to my artistic practice. I have avoided including "dialogical" pieces derived from interviews or debates in order to emphasize the more theoretical-didactic side of my work. I hope I have thus been able to bracket for the reader the logical unfolding of a discursive sketch derived from the actual conception and execution of my work.

Specifically, each text can be read as the ideational background against which to gauge the operative progress of my inquiry into art and its individual stages. This approach is common to many other artists who share with me the ambition of a project aimed at redefining the aesthetic problems resulting from the failure of post-modernist artistic practices. In this sense, it is necessary to point out that the tendencies and preferences associated with the label "Arte Debole" [Weak Art] are to be read within a broader and more dynamic framework than those suggested by the simple definition of a temporary current or poetics, which for all intents and purposes is no longer "in progress."

The label "Arte Debole" was first introduced by Flavio Caroli, though I take responsibility for its particular use in many of the movement's thematic exhibitions. Moreover, many connotations are not entirely supported by the contents of the pages that follow, especially in view of the fact that much is inspired by the notion of "Weak Thought," developed by the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, with whom I share a deep critical affinity and agreement on several philosophical issues and other areas of inquiry.

Arte Debole served as the strategic expression highlighting a very specific polemical stance within a precise cultural milieu —

that of Turin in the seventies — whose ideological matrix was dialectical Marxism. In the realm of the visual arts, this corresponded to the experience of Arte Povera.

There is no doubt that Arte Povera has given us great works, yet its preeminence over a twenty-year period (now formally institutionalized in the "sanctuary" of the Castello di Rivoli)¹ has certainly not spawned other alternatives. And this precisely at a time when its museification pointed rather to the irreversible loss of its creative surge and to a repetitive involution typical of the worst kind of academic mannerism. These symptoms were already perceivable in the latter half of the eighties, a decade culturally characterized by problems different from those underlying the poetics of Arte Povera.

Harkening back to Vattimo's philosophy of Weak Thought within the post-modern debate seemed to offer practical- theoretical suggestions suited to a programmatic analysis of the ideological presuppositions of Arte Povera vis á vis energism, process art, and dialectical pseudo-pantheism. It also afforded the possibility to isolate a more appropriate theoretical matrix to frame the social-political changes that had characterized the cultural physiognomy of Turin during the past decade.

Beyond these general goals, the term Arte Debole served also to mark the procedures of an artistic practice that developed specific styles along the way. Though these can be perceived concretely in the works themselves,² the writings have contributed to their formulation in that they tried to furnish a coherent critical justification.

¹ I must underscore the ever-growing successful and premature historization of arte Povera (poor art) which has allowed its artists to be represented and exhibited in the most important galleries and museums of the world.

² We ought to consider the "categorical" sense of terms such as Fantastic, Oxymoron, Chiasmus, Ornament, Remainder, and Passion. These terms have oriented the work increasingly toward the overcoming of the programmatic line of conceptual art, especially as it has evolved into its recent manifestations.

Along this path I have benefited from lengthy discussions on many knotty concepts with Pietro Bellasi, as well as from the cultural stimulations provided by a close friendship with my Academy "maestro" Giuseppe Riso. To the first I owe a debt of gratitude for helping me to clarify in sociological terms several of the themes I deal with here; to the second I owe a similar debt for having encouraged and given me the opportunity to present to the public, in an authentic confrontation within the prestigious Accademia Albertina of Turin, some of the writings included in this volume. The memory of Giuseppe Riso's untimely death is borne in the awareness, which he aroused in me, that the critical mind cannot realize itself as dialogue and debate unless it conducts itself without intellectual prejudice and dishonesty. Intellectual freedom and honesty are human qualities that he held dear and knew how to bring to life by means of a conversational and writerly wisdom.

Further suggestions, instigations and theoretical analogies are the result of my working with Collins & Milazzo and Peter Carravetta over the years.

Moreover, these working papers would not have been possible without the constant discussions I have had with Renato Ghiazza, Luigi Antinucci and Renato Alpegiani, to whom I am tied by feelings that go beyond friendship, and are sealed by our common intentions and the sharing of many collaborative projects.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Maurizia Vittone, without whom I would not have been able to persevere through those years. Without her the whole adventure perhaps would never even have begun.

G.C.P.
TURIN, 21 MAY 1997

[MEMO: published in....

Peter Carravetta

'Been There, Done That' The Work of Art from Aesthetic Indifference to Ontological Threshold

The ways in which the visual and plastic arts have experimented with and valiantly sought forms that speak to (and not just speak about) reality and the social order, are numerous and fantastically diversified. One need only take a slow walk through the map constructed by Milazzo and Collins in their audacious survey, **American Artists of the 80's**.¹ Or even take a cursory look at some illuminating essays published in the periodicals of the art world through the eighties into the early nineties.² The issue of having to accept the untenability of any specular or necessary relationship between art and reality (whatever the sense attributed to the latter) was a major underlying topos at the time. For that is the context within which to read Gian Carlo Pagliasso's **Déjà Chimera**, recently published in a bilingual edition by Editions de l'Afrique du Nord.³ Of the five essays, I would like to focus momentarily on the fourth one, "The Work of Art and the Decline of Reality" (93-98).

¹ Collins & Milazzo, curators. **The Last Decade. American Artists of the 80's**. Tony Shaffrazi Gallery, New York, 1990. Exhibit was open Sept. 15 to Oct. 27, 1990: "A New Glossary of Broken Facts. Postmodern Abstract Expressionism, mannered Conceptualism, Contemporary Folk Art, the New Formalism, Hyper-Kitsch, the "New Poverty" discourse as a lead into the 'junk' or 'scatter' aesthetic, the issue of quality versus quantity – each of these propositions are like 'black birds' (crows) on the horizon." P. 56.

² See for instance Peter Halley, "Frank Stella and the Simulacrum," in *Flash Art*, 126, Feb.-Mar. 1986:32-35; Achille Bonito-Oliva, "Neo-America," in *Flash Art*, 138, Jan.-Feb. 1988:62-66; Marco Colapietro, "The Painting as Structural Reason. Domenico Bianchi," in *Tema Celeste*, 27-28, Nov.-De. 1990:39-43; G. Roger Henderson, "The New Metaphysical Art and its Legacy," in *Tema Celeste*, 26, Jun.-Oct. 1990:37-42; and Daniel Wilhelm, "The Kitsch Quarrel," in *ART & TEXT*, 41, 1992:58-68.

³ Giancarlo Pagliasso. **Déjà Chimera. Saggi/Writings 1987-1990**. Edition d'Afrique du Nord, Tanger, 2001 (isbn: 0-9646466-8-4. Bilingual edition, 116 pp.)

Pagliasso begins with the assessment – common in philosophical discourse during the late seventies and early eighties, from semiotics to deconstruction – that

The decline of evidence is marked by the suspension and distancing of the referent through the primacy of the model (from production to media), after which we are witness to the loss of the object itself, in the name of essence. But it is such an absence that now comes in to fill clusters of meaning that once made up, for the Subject, its material evidence. (93)

Otherwise said, we are at the juncture of the *disappearance of the Object* (or of art as existing solely as a sign in a differential exchange economy of capital-driven simulacra), the *uselessness of the concept of the Referent* (what with post-structuralism and the unheroic decline of the left), and the implied “*death of the Subject*” (and of its Hegelian unconscious). Coming from Turin, it was inevitable that some shard of Vattimo’s theory of the weak ontology of art would slip into his own discourse.⁴ However, Pagliasso is not a nihilist, because both his work as an artist and his reflection as a theoretician point to ways in which the Subject has *not given up* the struggle to exist, in fact it continues to re-emerge in some other guise, perhaps disclosing some newer dialectic, and necessarily speaking a “foreign language,” but living and suggesting possibilities nevertheless.⁵

This positive, “possibilist” approach to the art scene is refreshing. Art is aware that it can only work as simulacra, as image, and so has abandoned pretenses at representing anything other than itself. In short, the notion of the autonomy of the art object, and with that a certain indifference of the aesthetic construct, was a given.⁶ And a given was also its dialectical opposite tendency, namely, that of seeking some sort of legitimation through consciousness, which was also fragmented and unmoored in the archipelago of re-productive ghosts. Echoing Freud, where there was an Ego, there now reigns – not the Id – but the Image.⁷ Even the energies of whatever can be associated with the Id,

⁴ See by Gianni Vattimo, *Poesia e ontologia*. Milano, Mursia, 1968, and “Dialettica, Differenza e Pensiero Debole,” in G. Vattimo and P.A. Rovatti, eds., *Il pensiero debole*. Milano, Feltrinelli, 1983:11-27. On Vattimo’s philosophy see Peter Carravetta, *Prefaces to the Diaphora*. W. Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 1991:215-35.

⁵ At the end of this assessment of Pagliasso’s theory, what is required is a critique of his artistic production from 1995 onward, especially those in which he utilized autobiographical and household print fabrics.

⁶ That this tendency was informed by (at the time growing cadres of) deconstructive critics can be gathered from Robert Pincus-Witten chronicle, “Theory Weary,” in the cited Collins & Milazzo’s catalogue, 1990:41-47

⁷ With Baudrillard in mind, Pagliasso reiterates that the oxymoronic dynamics of the work revealed that “the unconscious lacks the symbolic, while its counterpart the imaginary redoubles the real...To the earlier

from pornoart to chaos theory to recyclable sentimentalism on cable and in popular fiction and film, all must be realized, or incorporated into, an Image. And the image has no body, by definition.

The result is that artworks, and we might say even literature in certain contexts, have swum in the seas of the permutable and ever floating Signifier, while Signifieds were handled as expendable, manipulable, themselves signs of something else. In one passing attempt at circumventing the inevitable abyss and the phantasms of nothingness, Pagliasso turns to the only guaranteed evidence of reality, that is, one's body – *sum, ergo cogito!* – and one's awareness of doing something. Of being an artist, for example. So he cites approvingly Pietro Bellasi's book, *Il giardino del Pelio*, in which the valorization of the physical creation of the artwork itself is part of its meaning, in the process making a case for a non-alienated aesthetic experience: "isn't it time to begin to rethink pictorial art (and, in general, all types of artistic productions) as a sublime, irreplaceable residue of manual artisanship. The workshop of metaphor."⁸ But this veteroleftoid historical hermeneutic does not serve any generalized theory of art, it simply announces that there have been several artists who made a big deal of the fact that they were doing the work themselves, and as being-in-the-art (such as happens with performances, living theater, body painting, surrealist dance, etc.), it acquired a special dispensation and was to turn into a relatively popular mode or paradigm.

In both cases, however, we are speaking of circumscribed communities, driven by exchanges of capitalized-images and a shrill and unpredictable art market. And yet, inevitably, the art scene in its near entirety is depopulated of its most vital instincts and illuminations:

From the vantage point of the weak materialism that informs the present phase of capitalism, the work is rather a rhetorical effect whose body no longer bears the seal of pertaining to some ontology of substance and matter. (96)

It is clear that the groundlessness of signification is real, that the crack in the cosmic egg is no longer a joke, and that we are awash in a rhetoric of effects but without links to any one or several possible rhetoric (or ideology) of causes. The final observation is even more peremptory, and disenchanting: whatever art or the artistic sign is, there is no point looking for an ontological connection to something else – whether metaphysical or political or existential or what not – because there is no possible ontological status of art.

At least there are no visible or plausible links. Again, skirting nihilism.

centrality of the function of the ego (over reality) is now substituted a mechanism that recalls the unconscious as the space of entropy, collapsed and neutral, unable to explain the secret ciphers of the Subject." (ib., 94)

⁸ Cf. Pietro Bellasi. *Il giardino del Pelio*. Genoa, Costa and Nolan, 1987, p. 25.

But if this is not the end of the avant-garde -- and all its belated neo-epigones, -- I don't know what is. Perhaps the last decade of the XX century did seal and give consistency to an era which, according to this writer, began August 6, 1945, and then instead of evolving it turned further and further into itself, away from the world.

The overall scene can be called absurd or illogical, but it is never wanting in attempts at carving out a meaning of sorts, the predominance of the image notwithstanding. It is well known that behind conceptual art lied the conviction that art could indeed fuel ideas and "concepts" and re-arrangements of the (images, objects of the) real. Yet in this chaotic and mass-mediated sociocontext, the work of art can still make leverage on its fundamental quality, *fantasy*, and lurch forward to "fictitious reference enabled by rhetorical registers," which end up constituting their name, identity, or a working poetic of sorts, even an "essence." But this essence, we now know, is not a Great Metaphysical Immutable Essence. The Art World, beneath the glitter and camp cynicism, is much saner than that.

I am arguing that Pagliasso is leaving the door open to a development of poetics that is truly an ontological threshold. And he does not necessarily have to agree with me. It is based on the concreteness of what he would call the rhetorical trace. In brief, I believe we must look at the workings of art and its production/consumption in terms of *circumscribed geopolitical environments*. What we can posit, then, is at most a local identity, a regional ontology, a *rhetorically informed* working definition. Pagliasso sees at this juncture a curious twist: "the work exceeds the very referentiality of the object, announcing the residual persistence of the Subject." (97)

In order to achieve this exchange of the suddenly re-invented or re-emerged subject, Pagliasso must conceive of the material art object as a "monumental trace," as *memory* of the "remainder," as *witness* of a desire toward "the future of its own legitimacy." As he argues in another text from this period, Pagliasso is fully aware that there has been a "de-realization" of the aesthetic and that there exist historically connected "detournement[s] in the evolving of the ontology of the work of art."⁹

In this context, art is predisposed, again, to allow sentiment and melancholy and transient moods as meaningful causes in the rhetorical (in the topical, argumentative weave) effect of the work. Whatever the modality, though, what this interpretation of the status of the work of art just before the end of the second millennium announces, is the re-turn or re-appearance of an art driven not by (essential) Subjects, and not (only) by (inevitable) Capital,

⁹

See in *Déjà Chimera* the article "The Coming of the Fantastic," pp. 73-84.

but directed at social-cultural entities called s/subjects, agents and, in plain English, people. Being a regional entity, the sociocultural vistas and implications of the work may apply, meaningfully, only locally. On the positive side, this demi-sized subjectivity retrievable in “leftovers” can serve as a link between anonymous objectivity and individual aesthetic need:

The remainder is supportive of the eventuation of this marginal subjectivity in various ways: for instance, though the “dirty” ornamentation which the work foregrounds but which is produced at a lower level of craft – such as consumer goods, household mouldings, coy statuettes in the garden, and funeral-related plastic implements. (97)

In the end, it is a temporally-structured imagination that both perceives and recreates the dialectic of the memorized remainder, a subject who, no longer obliged to hierarchy or axiomatics, can now be aesthetic *and* ethic at the same time. The ideal artwork, which we expect to see realized in Pagliasso’s production of the late-nineties, is announced as being driven by a compulsion to Question, or to Appeal:

And yet it is precisely within this paradox, at the juncture where the remainder ushers forth by retaining yet showing the pertinence of the Subject as deferral, that the appeal of the work expands. An appeal that contains the ethical call to a molecular and pervasive responsibility aimed at spurring art to respond in positive terms to society’s provocations.” (98)

In line with his observation in another essay, titled “Theory” (pp. 99-115), in which the author cites Joyce’s Aquinas concerning beauty’s three requisites, namely integrity, wholeness and radiance, perhaps Pagliasso is being unwittingly Romantic, an old-school Marxist-utopist. But of course that is only an impression. Pagliasso takes the unavoidable plunge into the mare magnum of traces, icons, residues of civilization,¹⁰ not as something to discard or ignore, and certainly not in ironic or parodic gestures, but as the generators of newer and untried processes of imagination and signification.

¹⁰ The notion of the cultural mileau as generally an amass of debris, torrents of disanchored signifiers is developed, along sociological lines, by Adelino Zenini in **Il Moderno come residuo**. Roma, Pellicani, 1989. On Zanini’s work, see my article “The Postmodern as Residue,” in **Romance Languages Annual**, Vol. III, W. Lafayette, Purdue Research Foundation, 1992:167-74.

In this same essay, Pagliasso demonstrates how an analysis of the passions of the body, can disclose positive pathways. He identifies, through an ad hoc semiotic, five different types of body-in-art, namely the Sick, the Exotic, the Machinic, the Compulsory and the Archaeological body. In the variety of ways of organizing the gaze, or temporality, or ideational content or transfigured evocation, each type of body pierces the envelope of our viewing-interpreting habits, shocks us into seeing different rhetorical registers as different articulations of a deeper need or vision. True, the body-in-art can be seen as the ultimate “object without any finality,” but it can also be experienced as a material symbolism, a tenuous but empirical evidence, a correspondence at some higher level of unity:

This materialism finds its sediment in the symbolic texture of culture. Unlike the ontogenic individuation of desire, it is not inclined to restore warmth and *elan vital* to the lost object. Rather, it elevates the superficial objective resistance to the realm of the spiritual. In this way, the subjective question can, in its allegorical guise, interrogate being. (114)

Here, at the end, we have a key word, possibly announcing what is to come in Pagliasso’s theorization, or even, and greater challenge, in his work – and that is, *allegory*. Perhaps there exists an allegorical way of seeing which would disclose the hidden and unmentioned allegorical horizons present in most artworks. Allegory is constitutionally a socially interactive mode of exchange or artistic practice and is therefore grounded in ethics. Since the viewer is also always the viewer-critic, perhaps the critic ought to consider the “ethical” responsibility of responding to an artist’s “ethical” mode of exploring and regenerating images and sense. But in order not to fall into quaint old-fashioned symbolic systems of categorical legitimation (such as we have, for instance, with theories of allegory from the Trecento to the early XX Century), the allegoresis of critical intervention must, as it manifests its own social-political and aesthetic grounding, also ask of the artwork interpreted that it evidence the commitment to what is outside of itself (since, as we saw, self-reference and mock-irony at the instability of the artistic sign had not given great results in the seventies). The criticism must itself be an allegory of the reading of the work of art.

It became evident at some point that the common perception of everyday things is replete with signification, with itineraries into the symbolic and existential reality of individuals. In an interview dating from 1991, the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye observed how “the common knowledge of things” can be the setting to reconnect pathways to thinking and perceiving, and in his case to redraw the bridges between marginal and continental, between lower and higher social class, amidst the recognized wealth offered by a multilayered cultural ethnography.¹¹ Or, to cite a major interpreter of art in our time, the philosopher Arthur Danto,¹² the pathways disclosed to art at the end of all ideologies and the depauperation of the aesthetic is to transfigure the ordinary, the common place. But that automatically triggers a greater responsibility in *both* artist and critic, as a rhetorical-social contract is issued, and a work has been set into production-circulation that makes claims to relevance. The critic must do extensive tracings of the work, weave a discourse about symbols that do not even exist. All this, without any irony.

That is the true postmodern allegory: the one whose necessary referent cannot be located with any degree of precision, nor positioned without constant slippage and metamorphoses.

¹¹ See Terence Maloon, “Interview with Wim Delvoye,” in *ART & TEXT*, 41, 1992:78-81.

¹² See Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980.