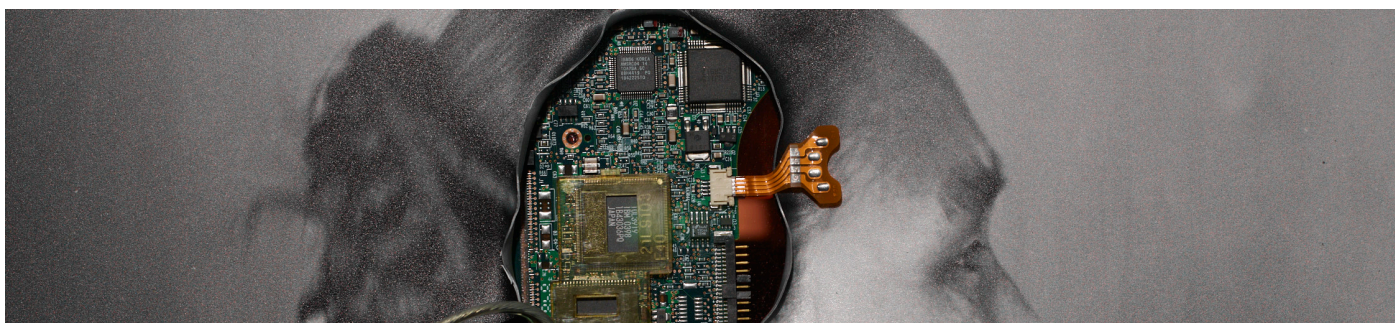


# CERTIFICAZIONI DI ESISTENZA

Beatrice Benedetti in conversation with  
CHRISTIAN FOGAROLLI

28 September

31 December 2023



*The title of the dialogue is taken from the solo exhibition in 1997 of an artist linked by profound friendship to Alda Merini, namely Giovanni Bonaldi, who illustrated several of the poet's poems. Exactly 50 years earlier, Merini had encountered "the first shadows of her mind", being interned for a month in the Villa Turro clinic in Milan, where she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Her life and art would be marked by continuous psychiatric hospitalizations.*

**Beatrice Benedetti** The most immediate curiosity is as to why you began to devote much of your research to the relationship between art and science, with a focus on physiognomy, mental healing, and the connection to the body.

**Christian Fogarolli** This is one of the questions I ask myself, it is difficult to try to understand myself, my only explanation is a personal attraction to abnormality, to what a given society deems different, wrong and in need of care, rules and firm controls.

**B.B.** In this interest is there a personal cue, an auto-biographical affair, or is it a realization that today's "cold," alienating, and hyperaccelerating society may be a risk factor for the mental health of individuals in general?

**C.F.** In fact, the only auto-biographical events related to these kinds of issues are my personal experiences and sharing during my research in centers of physical, mental and isolation

treatment, my studies and insights in archival contexts, in repositories where not only resides a historical memory but also a heritage that needs to be enhanced and known. Some of my recent projects focus precisely on how contemporary society, through scientific and technological progress, on the one hand continues to create new cures and on the other to produce new discomforts and disorders in a continuous mechanism of both repair and destruction. This fascinates me.

**B.B.** You state that you want to "de-construct" the binary distinction between sanity and psychic deviance. How does your work contribute to this overcoming?

**C.F.** Art can create new perspectives and points of view, my work only attempts to raise new questions about what can be defined as "normal" or "abnormal" in a given historical, cultural, geographical, societal and political

context. I do not believe that this binary boundary can be crossed; art is only one of the many tools that are available to analyze, critique, share, and study.



*The Outer Reaches of the Inner Self*, 2020, exhibition view at REAKTOR, Wien. Ph. Julia Gaisbacher&Bildrecht

**B.B.** Glass is among the materials you frequently use, with which you create realistic anatomical objects or imaginative prostheses. For example, in the series "A form of delusion," you delve into a syndrome that makes one perceive one's body as fragile as glass, a disease that affected such illustrious men as the King of France Charles VI and is cited in various historical and literary sources, from Miguel de Cervantes to Boccaccio. Is the intent a reminder of the fragility, depression and melancholy still pervasive today?

**C.F.** I think that sometimes it is fascinating and important to reflect on the present time starting from historical research in order to understand how some dynamics of our past, more or less recent, are characterized by an incredible contemporaneity or can help to reflect on this. The recent world health emergency, the ongoing war events, have made the perception of mind and body more fragile, I decided for this purpose to use in some works the glass material, an

emblem of fragility and intangibility in the working process. In this regard, I would like to quote a piece that appeared in 2015 in Paris Review and was written by psychologist Adam Phillips in reference to the comparison between glass and the human body: "The illusion of glass has a powerful contemporary resonance in a society in which anxieties about fragility, transparency, and personal space are relevant to many people's experience and to anxieties about life in the modern world".

**B.B.** Can you illustrate your project "Pneuma," which originated during the emergence of Covid 19?

**C.F.** Pneuma is a project composed of several different phases of research and is based on the relationship between Italy and Europe on a legislative level in the field of mental health, specifically on the interplay between Law 180 and the 2005 Declaration of Helsinki and how these directives are applied in different countries. This led to a series of trips and firsthand experiences in different European countries such as Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, England, Romania, and the Czech Republic. In these countries, collaborations were born with some of the major psychiatric institutions, developing a first-hand encounter with the people who live and work in these places, trying to challenge with them the processes of classification of mental distress and the consequent marginalization of the individual. In some contexts, recreational activities of reading, drawing, theater and music were developed. This led to share not only time but also the material that had been created: drawings, paintings, voice recordings and experiences; all of which

served as inspiration and planning for the creation of a final, immersive work composed of a film, photographs and glass sculptures.

**B.B.** In this project during the lock-down you underwent MRI, what results did you get?

**C.F.** The new magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machines with diffusion tensor make it possible to obtain even three-dimensional images made by a tractographic method that depicts anatomical brain bundles. Under the supervision of researchers and doctors, I subjected my body to a long MRI scan at an international research center, the CIMeC Center for Mind/Brain at the University of Trento/Rovereto. The data obtained, which were given to science for medical and scientific research purposes, were later processed in the construction of images of my brain in different cuts and perspectives, obtaining real self-portraits.



C. Fogarolli, *Pneuma*, 2020, nuclear magnetic resonance on the brain of the artist. CIMeC Center for Mind/Brain, Rovereto.

**B.B.** The "pneuma," as "vital spirit," but also as the core of the emotional and rational sphere, has been studied both by the Presocratics and the Stoics, but also by Galen's proto-medicine. Tell us about the alchemical process by which

you "recreate" this mysterious evanescent component of the human body?

**C.F.** The term Pneuma is the human part related to the spirit, the soul, the vital breath; it is the unknown part that today's science still cannot refute with data. As you mentioned the concept of this word is really complex and has an ancient tradition going from Greek philosophy to alchemy. I decided to use this term because of its connection to the word psyché and medicine, Galen was one of the first to mention it in this domain taking it from Stoicism. Descartes took up this knowledge, mistakenly, by declining it through "animal spirits": "a gentle wind that swells the ventricles." Pneuma is in my vision the essence of mystery, a spirit impossible to recreate. I have tried to bring this term back to life through a film, moving images interacting with glass sculptures and photographs in which the viewer is immersed in environments of light and dark, between hypothetical healing actions and alchemical gestures in a dichotomy between organicity and intangibility, between visible and invisible: *malum sine materia*.

**B.B.** You have traveled to different European healthcare institutions, what findings or experiences have struck you the most?

**C.F.** One of the remarkable aspects of this research is having the opportunity to see first-hand how different countries relate to the problem of mental distress in very dissimilar ways. Now, my opinion is that the overall picture is really diverse in relation to geographical area, political and social systems, and the evolutive history of the different environments. European regulations often try to create uniformities on different issues, but often in a sterile way, art in its own way and in its most varied forms seems



to be able to bring tangible support and help in treatment practices.

**B.B.** Veronese psychiatrist, Vittorino Andreoli strongly contests the conception of murder as a crime necessarily committed by a mentally ill person, arguing instead in favor of the compatibility of psychic normality with the most heinous murders. What do you think of this clinical thinking?

**C.F.** It is exactly what I refer to in several projects, how the nuances in individual and collective thoughts and actions are numerous and often indecipherable. Art can therefore be an extraordinary tool to approach this, working through images, artifacts and participatory works, the viewer's perception can even find aesthetic qualities in a violent or deplorable action. Psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and even forensic or criminological sciences have always needed art and creativity; without them not only would they not have evolved but perhaps they would not even exist. Yet, in today's society, art is increasingly seen as mere entertainment and amusement related to fashion trends, no longer as a discipline that teaches, educates critical thinking, free judgment, and new points of view, for Salvatore Settis it even helped to live.

**B.B.** Again according to Andreoli, the environment helps structure the neurobiology of madness, along with the genetic inheritance. According to your view as a humanist artist, what do you think are the major environmental risk factors for individual and collective mental health today?

**C.F.** It is not for me to draw up such statements, a part of my recent artistic research, however, is concerned with the importance of the very environment for the mental health of the

individual based on the so-called "environmental psychology." Some works reflect on how polluted and degraded environments act negatively on brain activity leading in some cases to neurological disorders, developmental issues in children, and on the overall quality of people's lives. There is similar interest in the impact of digital technology in creating new addictions and behavioral distress especially among the younger population.

**B.B.** I would like to finish with the words of poet Alda Merini, so appropriate to reflect on the sharp dualism between normality and deviance, corrections and trespassing. "I have the feeling of lasting too long, of not being able to extinguish myself: like all old people my roots find it hard to let go of the earth. But then again, I often tell everyone that that cross without justice that was my asylum only revealed to me the great power of life"<sup>1</sup>.



*Pneuma*, 2020, workshop with volunteers and patients at schwarzescafé | Luma Westbau, Zurich, Switzerland.  
Ph. Christian Fogarolli

1. Alda Merini, *La piazza della porta accanto*, curated by Guido Spaini and Chicca Gagliardo, Bompiani, 1995, p. 59

Cover image: C. Fogarolli, *Omaggio a Piero*, 2023, detail. Pigment print on lead sheet, digital component, cables, mirror, 70 x 57 x 5 cm. each. Ph. Carlo Baroni

GALLERIA  
ALBERTA  
PANE

GALLERIA  
ALBERTA  
PANE

GALLERIA ALBERTA PANE  
44 - 47 rue de Montmorency - 75003 Paris  
Calle dei Guardiani 2403/h Dorsoduro - 30123 Venezia  
info@albertapane.com - albertapane.com