



G. Paolini, *Dall'Atlante al Vuoto in ordine alfabetico*, edited by S. Risaliti, Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2010.

From the initial intention to republish the book *La verità in quattro righe e novantacinque voci* (1996) the author went on to put together a collection of extensively revised writings, with 63 items and 48 plates that appear for the first time (replacing the drawings of the 1996 book). The texts of 36 items are from *La verità in quattro righe...* (some with new titles, others revised) while the remaining 27 are either unpublished or drawn from recent writings. The items of the “ABC” are preceded by the author’s “Foreword”, with an essay by Sergio Risaliti. The complete list is as follows:

Atlante [Atlas]	Essere artista [Being an Artist]	Piaceri [Pleasures]
Autore / Spettatore [Author / Spectator]	Essere o non essere [To Be or Not To Be]	Pietra filosofale [The Philosopher's Stone]
Avanguardia [Avant-garde]	Fattore K(ant) [K(ant) Factor]	Pittura [Painting]
B come Bartleby, Borges, Brummel... [B for Bartleby, Borges, Brummel...]	Forma [Form]	Prospettiva [Perspective]
Bellezza [Beauty]	Immagine [Image]	Quadri [Pictures]
Bianco [White]	Infine [Lastly]	Rappresentazione [Representation]
Classicità [Classicality]	Intelligibilità [Intelligibility]	Realtà [Reality]
Classicità [Classicality]	Labirinto [Labyrinth]	Rendez-vous [Rendezvous]
Clausura [Cloistered Life]	Limite / Linea [Limit / Line]	Riproduzione [Reproduction]
Comunicare [Communicate]	Melanconia ermetica [Hermetic Melancholy]	Ritorno (senza andata) [Return (Without Going)]
Concettuale [Conceptual]	Memoria / Mnemosyne [Memory / Mnemosyne]	Rovine [Ruins]
Contemplazione [Contemplation]	Meraviglia [Marvel]	Scrittura privata [Private Writings]
Contrattempi [Contretemps]	Museo [Museum]	Solitaire
Cornici [Frames]	Natura [Nature]	Stop
Cosmo [Cosmos]	Né prima né dopo [Neither Before nor After]	Storie [Stories]
De Divina Proportione	No comment	Titolo [Title]
Detto (non) fatto [Said (not) Done]	Nulla [Nothingness]	Vedere [Seeing]
Disegno [Drawing]	Ogni opera... [Each work...]	Verità [Truth]
Esempio [Example]	Ora come ora [Now as now]	Vero / Falso [True / False]
Esposizione (Universale) [(Universal) Exhibition]	Orario continuato [Unbroken shift]	Vita vissuta [Life Lived]
Espressione [Expression]	Panorama	Vuoto [Void]

FOREWORD

Some years ago while proceeding with my *Quattro passi. Nel museo senza muse* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2006), on the subject of the statement whereby “all art has been contemporary”, I found myself noting, “it’s this *has been* that doesn’t really convince me. Art is *always* contemporary: the artist who has indeed been contemporary continues to be so precisely because he never believed to be so”.

At a brief space of time I now have to overturn my declaration and say that art is *never* contemporary. To avoid equivocation and misunderstanding, what I mean is that though art adheres in chronological terms to the epoch in which it is conceived and is therefore contemporary with its own time (how could it be otherwise?), it does not however belong to that time: not only because it has no part in social or political events, but not even in intellectual ones of which it would indeed seem to be a precise witness.

Contemporary that is to say in its doings, but anachronistic in putting itself forward, in showing itself to the eyes of an age with which it happens to coincide. That doesn’t mean calling itself “anti-modern” but in a simpler and more radical sense placing itself “out of time”.

Meaning that the artist feels like he's acting apart, or better, not acting at all. He certainly insists and perseveres within the range of his activity (of his *doing* and not of his saying, as Paul Valéry well knew) but without declaring himself. Living, in brief, in a sort of closed order, voluntary absence, renouncing the title of proprietor, echoing the poetic invocation of Emilio Villa who invited "the best to take a step backwards"¹.

All this is quite different in an age, our own, where some artists still invoke (and even attribute to themselves) the carrying out of a constructive mission, of "a democratic art". Art and democracy: a peaceful cohabitation of course, aimed at getting round or even avoiding the possibility of ending up in a place of encounter or clash. Which is to say that the stature and greatness of each cannot avoid the fact that the two areas, over and above a reciprocal civil and respectful consideration, hold themselves to be incompatible and therefore irreconcilable.

Democracy resides, has put down roots, in the arena, in the (people's) square. Art is housed in (and does not leave) a secret locality sometimes called exile or refuge. The former enjoys the guarantee of number (a great number) while the latter communicates in code, its signals are ciphered.

Democracy sees the world as a territory governed or governable by a declared or hoped for harmony from which a blind and dogmatic cult of nature generally erupts. Whereas art observes the world from a due distance and has long understood that we shouldn't even think of correcting it.

The eternal business of the relationship between art and society seems to be protracted in the same way. They say and continue to repeat that the funds set aside to finance and promote artistic activities are insufficient – especially in Italy – and inappropriately distributed. Allow me to say that I consider further diminution necessary and decisive, to the point of total cuts, with the obvious exception of resources required for maintenance and preservation of our existing cultural heritage.

The point is to "de-professionalise" the role of the artist, to ignore – certainly not repress – his freedom of activity, to put the brakes on and finally eliminate the function of cultural entertainment currently practised by public institutions.

So with the certainty or at least the presage of being once more inconsistent, I reprise here what I wrote in *Contemplator enim* (Milan/Florence: Galleria Christian Stein and Hopefulmonster Editore, 1991)²: "Perhaps something is opening and closing, at least for me. A different phase is opening, a new area of reconnaissance stands on the horizon: and in order to observe it, the practice of the "grand tour", the precarious conquest and consequent abandonment of "exhibition spaces", sterile, short-lived colonies of a homeless *Aleph*, must be brought to a close".

And shortly afterwards, elsewhere, I noted: "Not one more exhibition, a wide berth for Biennales, Triennials or Quadrennials, places of punishment, and quinquennials (*Documenta*), obligatory residences. Let me go on hoping that I shall never more be constrained to appear in flag-waving shows, that I'll be able to escape the discomfort of figuring, of taking an active part in national, international or generational get-togethers and comparisons, able to avoid turning up and being 'tesseraed' into the mosaic of the situation (...). My eyes have seen enough. My ears have just brought here the monody heard from the threshold of the Benedictine monastery in Ferrara: one single note, always repeated because it is ungraspable, ecstatic voice of the 'blind' cantor. Or the limpid and discreet tolling of a droplet that falls at long, almost regular intervals into the circular fountain in the cloister of Thoronet Abbey: the circle gradually expands and is renewed each time from the point where the droplet falls, seeming to design a reflected, complementary architecture as counterpoint to the arches that enclose the perimeter of the place."

Since then more than sixty solo shows to date, and even more numerous group shows, have given the lie to my far-off resolutions. Which I now however feel the need to reformulate, once more promising myself a similar abstinence³.

Everything seems to proceed blindly in the idolatry of "innovation", a term that has become an actual shibboleth, a guarantee of truth and progress. One wonders about the reason behind a line of march so clogged up as to oblige us to proceed with increasingly greater risks, but without the slightest doubt about the need to insist and not to have second thoughts: how come we cannot, in art, sidestep such an evident superstition? After the noble

but breathless rushing of the avant-gardes (even the notorious 20th century “return to order” was in its way a variant, precisely an innovation though anti-modern), why not observe – or better, retrace – something perennial but not obvious? Why not transcribe impalpable truth, respectfully but not passively, not gratuitous, to set against the vanity of innovative inventions destined to undergo a fatal undoing immediately after manifesting themselves? The truly authentic original artist acknowledges his state of grace in the innocent, disinterested vocation that conceals from him all things that are not his own condition of a participating but distracted spectator, absent from events unfolding on the scene.

His eyes no longer make out any difference between an ink stain spreading out by itself on the drawing paper (Francis Picabia’s *La Sainte Vierge*) and a veduta which also seems to have configured itself independently and guided the painter’s hand, almost without his realising it (Paul Cézanne’s *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire*).

In a way, an artist’s experience is something like *kénosi*, a theological term which means “to empty out” and likewise in the reflexive sense “empty oneself of oneself”, the abandonment of self, to trust oneself without reservation to the inescapable dictates of an Absolute. An Absolute that is a trick, even though I like to let it survive in my thoughts and intentions. I need the Absolute, just as I need to grasp each time the fact that it doesn’t exist. And again, “the objective of the alchemist is to succeed in making ‘mystical marriages’ between the secrets constituting the essence of apparently inanimate bodies and the secret that constitutes the individual and super-individual essence of each person and of the human species in its entirety. In this sense, secret means a truth that is such precisely because it is objectively extraneous to the language of communication: wherefrom the effort to discover within itself the elements of a language that communicates nothing but says things”⁴.

This is an attitude that appears to oppose a certain satisfaction in carrying out current cultural practice, when by cultural we mean the wish to express and communicate.

A lot of us dug the grave for the word “inspiration”, decisively substituting it with terms like “inquiry” or “research”, but inquiry (always vaguely detective-like) or research (always vaguely scientific) may at the most seize a target, aspire to a result. Whereas a work of art has the privilege of not knowing, and above all of not wishing to demonstrate anything at all.

There are no laws or truths in art... But we might also say there are too many, each however with limited (or relative) validity depending on epochs and cycles that alternate in time: each of the works that gradually converge to increase the vast gathering or permanent assembly we call “History of Art” may, at first sight, appear to replace and overlay the voice of those that immediately preceded it, but in “truth” it will confirm their unquestionable and often unexpected topicality.

Art, as it seems evident to me, does not communicate, or rather, it has nothing else to communicate, since it has already expressed, once and for all, its existence, although without providing us with an explanation... It has announced that it exists, without adding anything to this mere (or presumed) remark. Which risks regression to supposition if not backed up by certain indications. If its very existence is uncertain and questioned, how can its presence be confirmed? But as we have already said, art does not offer any explanation, and also beauty, its unreachable messenger, comes rarely and dimly to the horizon line...

An atlas of the void might therefore not be the contradiction in terms it seems to be: indeed I believe it could reflect the absence of theories and demonstrations that generally subtend a text which is subdivided into various parts and which here, instead, leads us through the neutral linearity of alphabetical order to a composite and indeterminate list.

¹ Quoted by Andrea Bellini on the occasion of a tribute to Emilio Villa at the Castello di Rivoli in July 2010.

² Title taken from a line by Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura*.

³ Also in Enrico Castellani’s recently expressed intentions I seem to recognise accents which renew that attitude of mine and underscore an old affinity in our points of view.

⁴ Under the item *Alchimia*, in *Enciclopedia Filosofica Garzanti*, edited by F. Jesi, Milan: Garzanti, 1981.

AUTHOR / SPECTATOR

I don't know why I've always felt a certain embarrassment, a certain prudence in considering myself an artist, although everything or nearly everything seems to confirm it by now. A truly enviable track record, honours and results, not to mention a respectable income, do not allow me to have any doubts. I am – or am held to be – an artist.

It must be due to lack of specialist training, a propensity to observe rather than produce, or simply a question of character... the fact remains that over and above everything I feel more of a spectator than *the* artist that I am.

The artist isn't "outside the world", but nor is he "in the world": at first we look around ourselves, we're all spectators. Some people like the world, others like it less and believe they can move elsewhere, build a new and different one: the "sphere" of art.

Conceiving a work is not – as it would be obvious to think – something that is "entitled" to assert itself, that *unfolds* in the present, but something that *refolds* from past to future, that grafts the memory of an afterwards.

The artist does not want to speak and communicate directly, in real time: he doesn't want to impose his voice but to listen, seize an echo... And we're not dealing with a signal so new and different as to elude our understanding: on the contrary it is an ancient, hidden or forgotten trace, but one that may emerge from the most remote deposits of our memory.

I feel I ought to repeat it: I've never wanted to express myself in a work. I've always left the work to express itself (always demanded it should do so), to declare itself, to speak out loud and clear about what it is and where it comes from.

COMMUNICATE

Though true to himself the artist abdicates, renounces his name, his civil rights and the indecent proposal of the social amplification of his role (or non-role). What he grants is the investiture of the primary value in the work as such, originating from the same dynasty that precedes it in time and of which it is a direct descendant.

So the objective – but no, it isn't an objective! – the imperative is to "ex-communicate", to free language from the yoke of being operative, functional... to understand it as transitive. The "excommunication" regards direct speech (even only intentional) from artist to spectator. The "heresy" committed by the artist who intends to transmit something of himself, or of the world he claims to belong to, deserves condemnation, without granting extenuating circumstances, to exclusion from the History of Art.

Better to leave the footlights, retire to the wings and live backstage: a short move, a kind of enclosure that serves above all to get us away from the so-called "world of information".

There's an actual asphyxia under way, brought about by a vast process (now at saturation point) founded on that false value, emphatic and illusory, called "communication".

CONTRETEMPS

An experience of Time: it's the obligatory circuit, the well-beaten track around the sports field where we continue to run though well aware that the finishing line will recede to the same distance we have to cover in order to reach it. Not in competition but in a race against Time.

A feeling of Time: mortally wounded but still impeccable in dress and comportment, the artist hangs on for an instant just over the threshold on which he seems to hesitate but, in effect, he is no longer capable of proceeding.

A use of Time: it was precisely in 1918, the year peace was won with the end of the first world war, that De Chirico declared war on progressive and linear time. That was when he began his grandiose adventure featuring reckless statements and acrobatic about-faces, daring leaps into the void that were to consecrate his work as an authentic anomaly.

A measurement of Time: it's not so much to do with asking for an explanation of one picture or another, of this or that picture, but rather to do with their presumed dating, meaning the fact of their being gradually and inexorably older and older, set in the direction of a prior if not the first original sign of the species they belong to. Indicating that the search for why is not formed by the sum of experiences, the evolution of subsequent and progressive influences but, on the contrary, tends towards subtraction, to recovery of the increasingly previous matrix, right down to presuming the secret cipher, the unrenounceable signal of a *before*.

DRAWING

For years now I've never missed a chance to tackle the subject: I'm speaking about drawing in general and in particular about my own *Geometric Drawing*, far off in time but always visible "in transparency" in many of my works to date. Even more in particular, I'm talking about the faculty of the image to absent itself, to escape the picture while leaving its linear traces perceptible, the squaring, in such a way as to allow the canvas to "breathe", to evoke every other image that may virtually rise to the surface.

A trace that isn't a "subject" but a system of dots and lines, immaterial elements by definition but essential to implementing all possible visions, or even just the pure eventuality that a vision may come to manifest itself.

The drawing is the demesne of the image, that silent place where time goes by so slowly as to appear motionless. There are at least two ways of understanding the term "drawing". Drawing as the free flowing of a pencil on paper, a fleeting and immediate approach, sometimes unfinished, to the surface of the sheet. Another kind of drawing is the one that absents itself, disappears but at the same time remains to direct the times and modes of representation from "behind the scenes".

EACH WORK...

Each work, each in its own way, conceals its own rule which the artist doesn't know but *recognises* when that work manifests it to him. The work of art gives voice neither to the world nor to the subject: it simply gives form to itself.

What we normally deem to be and appreciate as originality, the quality of an artist's style, is actually an impediment which however he cannot avoid. Meaning that style is the right of way, the price the artist pays to access vision of the work: the works therefore exist thanks to their creators but also in spite of them, they are in the air...

Air, that certain lightness so dear to Italo Calvino, is not a lightness but a serious thing. It means leaving language to speak rather than giving voice to things.

CLOISTERED LIFE

If I wanted to permit myself a solemn phrase to set out with I could say that I have spent much of my existence in announcing, through many works, one single work (first or last) which right now I am perhaps about to forget.

Balance sheet time? Not at all: what presumption it would be to think that Time is willing to pay even a crumb of attention to our interests, occupied as it is in surveillance of itself... And then, how to evaluate and distinguish (enter in assets and liabilities) such different trials. Bring to zero, update, yes of course, start again I am now in a room at the Hotel des Artistes (new address: real or presumed?) to carry on or take the road back, to set up an itinerary where I can open my eyes onto the eloquence of vision: here I am, in a word, seeking to cancel out the difference, or at least ascertain the distance, between *something* and *that thing* which is imposed on the eye.

A bed, a table, two chairs, a lamp, a window... I hope the illustration here can help me to decipher a passage. Taken and developed in collage from a manual of descriptive optics, it seems to transmit an allusion so direct and convincing as to encourage me to attempt a definition of that explicit but fleeting datum called the "moment of truth". So I manage to see myself lying on the bed, legs crossed, with my left hand holding a sheet of paper that reproduces the same image we perceive from behind the subject's eye socket.

Vision is as if circumscribed, framed, taken by surprise from behind the wings, behind the eye of the seeing and seen character. His and our glance are superimposed and coincide in focussing on the sheet which he and we are observing: object and subject of an "obliged" vision, I observe and observe myself being observed.

K(ANT) FACTOR

They say that Kant was so intimately devoted to the idea of the absolute independence of art from reality that when set before a picture he would – in order to escape the inevitable connections between the artist's work and the subject represented – limit himself to observing the frame and the surrounding furnishings, casting his glance elsewhere.

LASTLY

So let us rise, get ready to accept our fate and hear the sentence:

*The Artist (Sisyphus), guilty of removing by deception the material obstacles
to directing the eye beyond reality with view to ignoring it
or by crossing it with the intention of favouring and reaching
the space of the representation or dimension of Art,
is condemned to perennial and inexhaustible seeking
of the secret traces of a work destined
to bring about, as soon as it is caught sight of,
the need and indeed the urgency for further research.*

The echo of that work, first and last appearance in the blind trajectory that an artist draws with his steps in time, comes to us like the expectation of an always postponed wager or like the memory of a work never completed and executed.

Neither alive nor dead, Sisyphus (the Artist) holds himself in unstable balance between affirmation and negation, truth and falsehood, memory and oblivion, in that suspended and boundless limbo which is the sphere of Art (yes: sphere, impenetrable volume, aboriginal and dazzling light) seen for an instant – or an eternity? – before the Big Bang of History which, from that inscrutable sphere, will unfold the more or less regulated and legible line we call, precisely, History of Art.

PANORAMA

At last we can settle down and take our places to observe something through any framing whatsoever... But it is a relative comfort because when we look at a camera or camcorder lens, at another apparatus or even simply at the shutter box of a window, the eye is immediately committed to fixing, to evaluating continual infinite variants which succeed one another during the long period of pose open on the world and its components in perennial adjustment.

So everything evolves, yes, but always within the fixed limits of the framing which transmits that certain vision to us. All at once a change in perception of how much we see: apparently negligible (it was enough to move slightly away, extend the area of our visual field) yet decisive and truly significant. That is to say, the viewpoint is no longer only an optical instrument, a purely physical datum, but becomes intellectual experience, mental and cognitive act.

PICTURES

The artist leaves... abandons something, and in leaving behind almost all of what surrounds him he opens in the picture a horizon that appears absolute to him. What fascinates him most is not to make one thing or another appear but to discover the way in which that or that other thing could fall onto the screen of the picture, intending the picture as an apparatus of suggestions, of illusions predisposed to configure an image that may or may not be there: not that or that other thing but a subject that stands for all possible subjects or, contrarily, any thing whatever placed on a plane.

A picture usually appears to us as a concluded, autonomous image, often highlighted by a frame that underscores the material limits of a vision, of a unity separated from the environment in which it is nonetheless situated. At times the image subtends a perspective trace that contributes to lending verisimilitude to the scene depicted, yet rendering it even more separate from the surrounding physical space.

Another perspective, this time mental or symbolic, leads us to suppose that other pictures may transpire, may coexist within a picture... Do all an artist's pictures (all the pictures in the History of art) comprise one alone? Our eye is mobile, precarious; that of the picture – if we want to attribute one – is fixed, immobile, it does not move and it does not close.

Works of art look at us. They look at us, and not vice versa. The work does not speak but sees, it sees us precisely in the moment when we believe we see it.

REALITY

Where is it? Enough has already been said about the art-world conflict: everything lies in asking ourselves what we mean by the one or the other.

I believe that artists tackle not so much reality as the most elegant manner of ignoring it. All that remains of reality today is its image, and it is this alone that we can observe.

TRUE / FALSE

Everything we see, hear, touch in each instant of our day is no other – so to speak – than the report, the “copy to” of what takes place around us. We experience the reality surrounding us as in “simultaneous interpreting”. All is translated, each thing is not what it effectively appears to be, that datum which comes to us apparently intact and original: everything is in fact referred back to us and processed by the sense organs responsible for perceiving it. We believe we know ourselves, but knowledge of what is within us (as in the ancient Socratic “Know thyself”), just like the modern and post-modern ambition to know what lies outside of ourselves, are still unanswered questions, as fleeting as our own shadow... At bottom, what we experience is not the Idea but the copy of the Idea, as Plato would say.

The history of images is also a procession of mediations and adjustments aimed at interpreting or copying those original and ungraspable data that we are no longer resolved to possess, restricting ourselves to observing them by reflection.

TRUTH

I'm increasingly convinced that truth corresponds to silence.

Set before each new work the artist always has the impression of having arrived at knowledge of the truth, theretofore concealed and now revealed in an instant. This is untrue. He will have the same impression (illusion) on other occasions, each time believing that he has reached the truth which, however, will continue to be unknown to him until he admits that the truth is not his but that of the work. And not even of that work but of that other one.

In a word, he will go on renewing the illusion that makes him believe he, his own hand, is running the game: until the moment when (a “when” always destined to elude him) his hand and his eye grasp the signal set beyond the horizon line.

Of the truth, then, no trace: or better, come to think of it, maybe and only a trace... If we still really want to make a statement, all we can do is listen.

UNBROKEN SHIFT

At the age of sixty-nine, here I am taking my first steps towards the threshold of seventy, in an area where the diagram of forces in play has altered sensibly: I say “sensibly” because the alteration regards precisely the sensation one feels of being in the world, which consists of standing up, on two feet, without being firmly fixed to the ground, yet remaining correctly balanced.

For quite some time I have avoided appearing in person (for television interviews) and submitting myself to the customary commemorative photos in which the artist poses triumphantly next to his works exhibited like trophies, each time providing more or less convincing rationales or improvised explanations. I think the time has come to explain my obstinate aversion to this.

In the visible aspects of an artist’s everyday life everything ends up underscoring the substantial falsity, or at least the inappropriateness, of the words and gestures attributed to his presence and his role: the one who is seen and portrayed carrying out his “functions” is just a stand-in, the facsimile of a non-existent original.

It may be that something real, like a hidden pattern, crosses the dense and uninterrupted sequence of “distinctive signs” that populate an artist’s biography. But in reality the succession of the various episodes only confirms the immobility, the pre-existence of what apparently flows by and renews itself: I’m seventy years old, but at the age of nineteen I painted a picture for the first and last time... It was a picture that in a certain sense would not leave space for other pictures that were neither replicas nor variants of that first occasion. This is because that first picture was also the last I was allowed to sign and date (to usurp) as my own.

I am neither here, nor someplace else... one could think as a result. Simply I am not: or better, I cannot belong to myself, nor to certain circumstances in which everybody, or practically everybody, is obliged to represent who we think we are.

If I do not exist, it is not so much by my choice, but due to a real and inexorable necessity, moreover, the urgency to follow “a continuous schedule” that is not in operation, and to remain at a calculated distance from the dictated actions of the world around me.

The artist neither knows nor says, he has no “civil status”, but he cannot avoid remembering and at the same time imagining or recounting, the advent of the vision that is about to be revealed.

I have pointed out elsewhere how the artist is not the author of “his” work, which in a certain sense has always been foretold, foreshadowed and pre-existing, but is only the actor – and therefore the “bearer” – of its representation.

The writer is no longer Giulio Paolini, but a copy conforming to the subject bearing that name: a subject that is not the self he seems but someone who has been reduced to bearing that face and that name.

Here I am, where am I?

© Giulio Paolini

Translated from the Italian by David Smith.