



G. Paolini, *Lezione di pittura*, Lugo (Ravenna): Exit Edizioni, 1994.

A preamble and eight texts – the first three reprising those of the book *Locus solus* (1993) – make up a collection of considerations about art, drawing on anecdotes, quotations and ascertainties regarding the “state of things” in the current art world.

This is the first volume of a trilogy, identical in format and graphic image, subsequently brought out by the same publisher (Cf. *Black out*, 1996 and *Giro di boa*, 1998).

PREAMBLE

I should warn the reader right away that no trace remains of the *Painting Lesson* announced in the title. I've never given a painting lesson because I've never taught an art that nobody can believe they are able to learn. Nor do I feel that the following pages, which moreover have no intention of doing so, could achieve any such objective¹.

So if the lesson doesn't take place (hasn't taken place) I should at least explain the reason behind such an arbitrary not to say illicit title: because a lesson is given and received, it is received precisely at the moment in which one believes to give it: to set forth, that is, the principle which as soon as it is pronounced will shortly come to decree its own end.

[p. 9]

THE WORK AT STAKE²

All at once here I am assailed by a doubt, scarcely veiled by the paradoxical appearance of the contradictory terms with which one approaches the page: observing doesn't mean seeing, don't we have to look in order to see?

Just as now, at the very moment in which I observe this page, I cannot touch the substance, the “truth” that the writing conceals from me.

I'm speaking of a blindness that I don't believe is exclusive to myself but affects everyone who is gifted with what is called, precisely, “spirit of observation” and therefore certainly every one of us who sets out to observe something. Paradoxically, as I was saying, it is we ourselves, who know how to observe, that cannot see: observing a picture doesn't mean seeing it: don't we have to look in order to see?³

Let's abandon artists' studios and museums for a moment and go out into the world. A map will help us to localise an empty rectangle (we can't observe it but can't avoid seeing it) which will indicate the existence of an Imperial City. We're in the heart of Tokyo, the same city where crowds once lined the way to bow, without looking, as the emperor's court passed by. Somewhat nearer, without however ascertaining its hidden beauties, we sight the Forbidden City, the impassable wall of yesterday's China.

Still today, here in Italy, we lower our eyes when the consecrated host is raised. And the mind lets the gaze go adrift, lingering over the glass on a table at the Café des Beaux-Arts, meaning when the eye is cast by itself, without seeking it, on a certain object, without even the remotest intention...

The Sienese don't give much importance to the quality, the “beauty” of the Palio (in origin it was actually nothing more than a rag), we might say they don't even look at it...

It will be beautiful only later, when it has been won and hung in the Palazzo della Contrada.

Something similar and equally symbolic happens to the work of art on its coming to light, on its being *at stake*: to the artist, just what that certain work might be that seems to emerge before his eyes, encounter his glance for an instant, isn't so important as touching its “truth”, what I mean to say is consecrating its impenetrable secret.

Just as the acrobat does not look at the public, does not seek our understanding: his smile is drawn by itself, in the challenge ever renewed by the increasingly arduous and gratuitous difficulty of the exercises.

Watching a scene doesn't mean observing it. Of course we continually happen to observe something: a face, the sky, an object... even silence. Watching a scene however means seeing it with eyes closed, forgetting it – and therefore being observed by it – as occurs with anyone who manages to find himself under *normal* conditions (at the theatre or in a museum for example) rather than under *accidental* conditions (for example in life).

A scene causes materials and figures to precipitate one upon the other and settle – without an immediate reason but due to their own most ancient necessity – on the uncertain horizon of representation, in the inexhaustible expectation of the announcement of an image. The work is there, we see it, but at the same time it does not manifest itself.

All in all it is representation that opens and closes eyes on the visible, that illuminates, obscuring the very reasons from which it moves, that boundless space which advances beyond our glance.

[pp. 22-23]

THINGS OF THE OTHER WORLD

Although unable to answer the question “what is art?”, we might tackle another equally insistent one: “where is art going (where has it ended up), how to give it a hand?”

This subject, eternal question, cannot but elicit once again the most disconsolate protest, perhaps together with hopes remotest. Which, apart from rhyming, also contribute to lending symmetrical form to a certain state of mind.

As for the art-world conflict (which should also be respectful cohabitation) enough has already been said: everything lies in asking oneself what is intended by the one or the other⁴.

Rather than tackling reality (personally I no longer really know what it is or has ever been) I feel artists should seek the most elegant way of ignoring it. Of reality today only its image remains, and this is all we may observe.

The state of cultural health goes through mysterious phases. Inasmuch as it is possible, diagnosis is always approximate and provisional, and it never gets as far as therapy.

To say, declare, exhibit, publish... It's certainly easier today, very easy, which is why it counts for nothing. And it is increasingly hard, almost impossible, to listen.

To avoid committing the umpteenth sin of pride you would need to know if anyone still cares about listening to the limpid and subdued voice we call culture. In brief, you would need to know who (apart from ourselves, the “non-workforce”) still shares our own expectations and delusions.

But who, who aside from us can mourn the same “loss”, the complete disinterest or the empty clamour that afflict us? Is art of this world or is it not?

If it is still granted to hope for something, then let us not air the question of Special Projects, International Meetings, World Conferences, Great Prizes...⁵.

Let us rather, and simply, implement a correct and ordinary administration of existing Institutes, stable and therefore stably neglected or forgotten.

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¹ “I gave up teaching at the Academy years ago, precisely to avoid giving young artists advice or telling young people how to become artists. Artists are not born, nor are they made: everything lies in a sort of act of faith with oneself. If chance were to make me a young artist today, maybe I'd avoid the mistake, albeit alluring, of venturing into the illusion of seeking increasingly different versions of the first, or last, picture I should limit myself to producing. Certainly the duration of execution could not keep abreast of the rapidity of current mass communications and that work, that sole work, would lose contact with the world. As you can see, I don't know how to give good advice”.

I'd like to associate this excerpt from an interview with Francesca Pasini (cf. *Flash Art* (Milan, Italian edition), no. 184, May, 1994) with another far more illustrious testimony: “As much as Canova was an ardent promoter of the arts, just as much did it pain him to see an immense multitude of young people dedicate themselves daily thereto, and he said: they cannot but become poor and sad:

since Italy and the world are full to overflowing with works of art, what on earth will so many pupils do? The worst thing is that they will keep up the supply of ugly mediocrity, because excellence has never been the inheritance of the many, and today more than ever we must work towards excellence alone: the academies should therefore accept everybody and look at the genius of each one, but when a person is seen to lack an extraordinary aptitude for art he should be sent home to apply himself to a more useful trade in the social order. Because I fear that this abundance, if it should begin to take the wrong road, will by its overbearing nature drag excellence down with it; and where this has begun to do harm it will lead to all manner of indecency so that the arts, having taken the wrong direction, will be unrestrained to the point of falling into utter ruin" (A. Canova, *Pensieri sulle arti*, edited by M. Brusatin, Montebelluna: Edizioni Amadeus, 1989).

² In Italian the title is *L'opera in palio*. A *palio* is a banner awarded to the winner of a contest, and by extension the contest itself, hence *in palio* = at stake. The Palio of Siena, in which ten of the city's seventeen districts (*Contrade*) compete, is a bareback horserace held every year in the main square (T. N.).

³ About twenty years ago I had a first presentiment, looking at Ingres: "(...) What surprises me about him is this 'blindness' of his, the purity of his attitude, the extreme devotion to detail, which draw him away from the dialectic – the problems, that is – of painting. He is blind to the integrity of his subject: when one talks of Ingres' 'mistakes' one must duly consider this attitude of excessive enthusiasm for his metier and technique, which becomes vocation and 'inhuman' dedication" (from an interview with A. Bonito Oliva, in *Paolini: opere 1961/73*, exh. cat., Milan: Studio Marconi, 1973). And again: "At the Bologna Biennale of painting, in 1970, I took part with a picture not my own... *Francis Picabia: Senza titolo, 1917* [*Francis Picabia: Untitled, 1917*] is indeed a painting by Picabia. The idea is to 'see' things: in other words, the painting divests itself of all its spatial attributes in order to offer itself to the spectator's gaze. The impossibility of definition (why that picture *is* that picture, its potential extension or reduction), the infinite interpretative equivalences of a dimension that is, however, always the same (the categorical existence of the picture as such)" (from *Note di lavoro*, in G. Paolini, *Idem*, Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1975).

⁴ I once happened to say: "If in politics that which appears is, and hence the discussion which causes something to appear is the being of the politician, it follows that in art, that which does *not* appear is (I didn't say that which appears is not)" (cf. G. Paolini, *Les fausses confidences*, Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1983).

⁵ The error that these 'Olympics' pursue doesn't depend so much on *who* runs them but on *what* they put forward. I don't believe I've contributed to the staging of that interminable colossus known as cultural policy. Even prior to its occurrence in our works, it is this preliminary and primary attitude that conceals, when there is one, what we call a 'message': blessed be the dilettantes when they are no longer so and don't yet know it.

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Translated from the Italian by David Smith.