



A Note on Giulio Paolini's Poetics

Right from his first picture *Disegno geometrico* [Geometric Drawing] of 1960, when he was only twenty, Giulio Paolini has developed his research by inquiry into the constituent elements of the picture, the space of representation, the phenomenon of seeing and the figure of the artist. Over the years his focalisation on the artwork considered in its becoming – in search of its own possibility of definition – led him to concentrate increasingly on the act of exhibition, to the extent of questioning the legitimacy or necessity of this showing in itself.

His works have “nothing to declare”: they don't want to communicate anything, they are limited to evoking the premises of their own manifestation. Comprising prevalently white canvases, sheets of drawing paper, plaster casts, photographs, plexiglas and a vast repertoire of iconographic elements (from details of antique paintings to fragments of sidereal images) they stage the expectation of an image that eludes any attempt at fixing, remaining suspended in the potential dimension. Renunciation of the achieved image – the constant postponement of revelation – leaves space for questioning the representation as such, for the framework that announces it, for the catalogue of hypotheses that precedes it and for the mystery that precludes it from immediate vision.

Suspension of judgement and denial of an assertive position find correspondence in the artist's abandonment of an active and constructive role: instead of being an actor on stage he prefers to remain anonymous and lose himself among the public, taking on the guise of the spectator accomplice, seated in the stalls and waiting for the show to begin. He shifts from “actor” protagonist to plain “bearer”: the artwork precedes and supersedes him; all that remains for him is to welcome it, to offer it hospitality. So there have been frequent stands-in, anonymous and silent, who observe or hold before them a picture, reflecting the eyes of the beholder in front of the work. In other cases it is the traces left by the artist who has exited the scene that bear witness to his “exile” from the field of action: top hats, shoes and other attributes of the magician's formal dress.

Among the major themes, the glance has been a privileged subject of inquiry right from the start. From the 1963 project *Orizzontale* [Horizontal] to the well known work *Vedo (la decifrazione del mio campo visivo)* [I see (The Deciphering of My Visual Field)] of 1969, to the eye motifs and visual cone developed towards the end of the seventies, right down to the complex visual plays implemented in the subsequent decades, the eye intervenes as both actor and director: it is “deciphered” in its limitations through its own mechanisms and tools. Unmasked in its “blindness” it can touch on and fix only what is this side of a threshold that cannot be crossed. The space beyond this horizon line is reserved for the artifices of representation, meaning the dimension proper to art. Hence the recurrent confrontation between material elements – overturned or shattered to reveal their specific weight – and virtual images evoked by perspective drawings or photographic reproductions. Actual visual devices based on a dichotomy between the unrenounceable attempt to conquer through the eye and the inevitable disillusionment of vision, Paolini's works stand as a diaphragm between incompatible dimensions: like mirrors or filters that measure the interval between reality and fiction where the metaphysical enigma of art resides.

Paolini's language is characterised by the use of ellipsis, fragmentation, quotation and doubling, employed as expedients for suggesting an unbridgeable gap with regard to the supreme model and for making the artwork a theatre of evocation. In this sense the geometry that defines many of his works implodes into a labyrinth of kaleidoscopic reflections, blind visions and closed-off perspectives. These procedures, studded with literary, philosophical and mythological references, find correspondence in differentiated and complex set-ups – often integrated with objects, clothing or furnishing elements – determined by dynamics that are additive (juxtaposition, multiplication), centrifugal (explosion, dispersion) or centripetal (concentration, accumulation).

Like the configuration of the works, their *mise-en-scène* is also based on complementary confrontations and circular itineraries that lead the vision to lose itself among its own trajectories.

The exhibition as the opportunity that justifies the artwork's becoming, the moment that announces its happening occupies by definition a foremost role in Paolini's practice. In the gesture that sets it forth, in the space and in the time variously assigned to accommodate it, the artwork finds its *raison d'être*. On the stage of the exhibition the artist reinterprets the same score, each time from the start: the voice of the artwork asking to be acknowledged in its identity without name and without official age, at once ancient and new, unpredictable. The exhibition as situation in which the work defines itself through the eye that takes it in is a theme that Paolini has investigated with great acuteness since 1963-64, in his first but never implemented exhibition project (*Ipotesi per una mostra [Hypothesis for an Exhibition]*, 1963) and in his first solo show which consisted of rough wooden panels leant against or hung from the wall, questioning the relationship between the picture and its supporting surface. Later his reflections on the act of exhibiting were formulated in declaredly theatrical settings and increasingly complex shows, to the extent of becoming an explicit subject of the works (for example in *Esposizione universale [Universal Exposition]*, 2005).

Over the decades the encounter with the work in its becoming has found a significant pendant in the artist's studio, appointed place par excellence for its appearance. Hence the worktable, the baize on which the artist, always starting anew, sets down and reorganises his playing cards. Hands that attempt to hold down sheets, pencils that measure the distance separating them from contact with virgin canvas, stand-ins that seek to place the tesserae of a mosaic in becoming, or picture galleries of canvases or gilded frames and drawn squares scattered over one or more walls: the card-table is always the same, as is the challenge which is tackled each time from the top.

In Paolini's most recent research attention is particularly focused on the artist's identity: on his "abstaining" with regard to the pre-existence of the artwork. The more the artwork is acknowledged as Absolute – indifferent to any possibility of appropriation or representation – the more the artist states that he is extraneous to its conception. Art "happens" unbeknownst to the artist: its conception is immaculate and the enigma of its becoming remains unfathomable. The renunciation of authorship, which already in *Disegno geometrico* was announced as a "vow of abstinence", is unequivocally declared in works such as *Immacolata Concezione (Senza titolo / Senza autore) [Immaculate Conception (Without title / Without author)]* (2008) and *Suicida felice [Happy Suicide]* (2010). Having sacrificed himself in favour of the exclusive voice of the artwork the artist may at last enjoy the unique privilege due to him: that of presiding over the artwork's inviolability. The sole prerogative that he can never renounce is in fact the urgency which, always from the start, moves him to set aside a reserved area, a private room sheltered from the world, where the work of art at the "X hour" may reveal itself in its authenticity.

© Maddalena Disch