



## **G. Paolini, *Quattro passi. Nel museo senza muse*, Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2006.**

The artist's widest collection of writings published to date brings together various pieces written between 2000 and 2006, divided into four chapters followed by an "Appendix" and integrated with iconographic sections.

### THE UNKNOWN ARTIST (ART HAPPENS)

#### 1. *Flashback*

As I have previously said and repeated, an exhibition is not the result, the sum total of a work phase or an anthology of works selected and gathered for the occasion. It is – and I would rather speak of the exhibition moment – a display of the works which, on that particular occasion, together form a sort of text, a picture story.

Even the title of the exhibition project knowingly echoes *The Unknown Masterpiece*, the famous Balzac story with which I want these humble and imprudent intentions of mine to fall into complementary and symmetric line. I refer in particular to the part of the story where Frenhofer, the elderly painter and main character, cannot help intervening and making the necessary corrections, giving the final touch to the picture (not his but by another painter, his friend and colleague Porbus) so that the work is remedied and can be brought to a successful conclusion.

This passage clearly shows that a work does not belong to one artist or another; it possesses an autonomous and independent identity of its own and existed as such before the painter stepped in, required only to confirm its legitimate existence. It is the work that guides the painter's hand, appropriating the artist (an unknown artist) and not vice versa.

Some time later the same theme with similar but contrary outcome appeared in another story, *The Madonna of the Future* by Henry James.

Just as Frenhofer is unable to restrain his hand and "blindly" fills the work (his own or not) with a formless interweave of signs and colours, Theobald (the other painter) remains inactive, aware of the impossibility, of the unbridgeable distance separating him from a suitable configuration of the work and doesn't dare even to touch the white canvas that stands motionless and virgin on the easel in his studio. If the hand of one moved inexorably within and without the surface of the picture, the hand of the other was as if blocked, restrained on the threshold of a space that was too luminous, blinding: "... a canvas that was an absolute nothing, cracked and faded with time"<sup>1</sup>. In both cases, we witness the "perfect crime" committed by the work against a wounded artist, disorientated but not resigned, who will not give up and faces a dramatic and uncertain duel every time.

This project was conceived and centres on the synthesis of four different exhibitions held in four different venues in the same period of time<sup>2</sup>.

For the occasion Giulio Paolini, in a certain sense, is not the artist but a guest of the exhibition space, asked to play the part of anonymous curator of the four different exhibitions. The works are indeed authentic, possessing an identity of their own over and above the signature (Giulio Paolini) certifying their material existence.

#### 2. *Original version*

Do I speak English? No, I do not speak English... I listen: "However great an artist may be, he can never be greater than a marquis".

I wonder why I chose these very words by Oscar Wilde and quoted them some time ago in a collection of my brief texts published for an exhibition<sup>3</sup>. I must admit that at the time I failed to fully grasp the meaning of the phrase, I merely succumbed to its ambiguous charm, its inscrutable but persuasive effect. Now, however, in today's light, where all that we are given to "know" must be "true" and, as the newspapers say, "report on the great issues of the

day”, I think I do grasp its meaning: although free from all demarcations and constraints, an artist will never be as “elevated” as he – e.g. a marquis – who stands on the pedestal of conventions and rituals, which hold him high above the ground, delivering him from the gravitational force of existence.

This hypothesis would seem to be confirmed by the recent publication of the *Memoirs* of a true aristocrat, the legendary Baron Alexis von Rosenberg: “– What do you do, *monsieur*? – Nothing. – Nothing? No one does nothing. – Look, *Madame*, I am always very busy. There is never enough time to do nothing”<sup>4</sup>.

No, I do not speak English but an exhibition visited in Paris<sup>5</sup> made me breathe the air of London; it prompted an imprudent and rash thought on the subject of truth or the virtual nature of places in the atlas of the History of Art, absolute territories free from geographical constriction.

I found myself arguing and outlining, yet again, two opposite and complementary sides to the concept of painting.

On the one hand, Monet *imposes* painting *on the* subject, he paints painting – we could say – initiating a path travelled again, some time later, by Jasper Johns’ “numbers” and “flags”... along the line commenced, some time earlier, from Chardin’s “attributes of painting” to Cézanne’s glorification of “painting as architecture”.

On the other hand Whistler, by contrast, *deposited* painting *in the* subject; the colour evokes and almost regenerates the vapours and reflections given off by the waters of the Thames. The brushstrokes accompany the flow of the river; the painted matter is inserted into the “truth” of the *veduta*.

“Art and literature ought, I believe, to try and break free of time. I have often been told that art depends on politics and history. I believe this to be totally false. The famous north American painter Whistler was present at a meeting where they were discussing the conditions of the work of art, e.g. the biological influence, that of the environment, that of contemporary history etc. Whistler said: ‘Art happens’. Art is a small miracle... which, in a certain sense, escapes the organized causality of history. Yes, art happens, or it does not; but this does not depend on the artist.

[...] As far as I am concerned, the process is more or less invariable. I start by glimpsing a form, a sort of distant island, which may be a story or a poem. I see the end and I see the beginning, but not what lies in between. This is gradually revealed to me, when the stars or chance come right. I must repeat the walk through the zone of shadow more than once. I try to intervene as little as possible on the evolution of the work. I do not want it to be corrupted by my opinions, which are, certainly, of no importance. The concept of committed art is naïve, because no one can truly know what they are doing”<sup>6</sup>.

“Devant le tout-Londres artistique et mondain réuni pour l’entendre, Whistler avait développé des thèses sur l’art qui prenaient le contre-pied des positions socialisantes de son adversaire, le critique John Ruskin. Ainsi, il déplorait que l’art fût désormais mis à la portée de tous et menaçât d’envahir tous les domaines, de la décoration des appartements au style des vêtements. En réalité, les masses s’étaient de tout temps montrées incapables de comprendre la beauté, préférant de loin le clinquant d’une marchandise industrielle à la forme parfaite d’un objet créé par un artiste. Celui-là seul, être d’élection touché par la grâce, était à même de voir dans la nature la beauté qui y était enfouie, comme dans le cas de la ville de Londres la nuit [...] ‘Mobile divinité, capricieuse’, l’Art fuyait d’un lieu à l’autre, s’attachant non aux peuples mais aux individus, passant du glorieux Grec auteur des marbres du Parthénon au Maître espagnol de la galerie de Madrid – pour se poser un instant ‘sur l’éventail d’Hokusai au pied du Fusi-yama’”<sup>7</sup>.

The History (or Geography) of Art has always been conducted via constant *coups de théâtre*; the reasons behind them produce no immediate effects, but subterranean messages, long-wave signals.

Two pictures, by two different artists, on the same subject produce two truly contradictory versions of it. In the two portraits by David and Ingres, the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte appears in two contrasting and irreconcilable guises.

The first is so “true” that it convinces us, in no half terms, that the artist *deposits* the body of a man in the picture. The second, on the contrary, *imposes* the abstract rules of portrayal on the man, and the “code” prevails over the truth until it cancels its significance, the organic presence of a body; of which only the single parts (the face, two hands, a foot), seen like parts of a wax statue in the empty wrapping of the large ceremonial cape, seem to float each on its own with no overall connection. Two pictures and two contrasting visions before which we observers

take no stance: illuminating words were spoken by José Ortega y Gasset<sup>8</sup> on these subjects (extraneousness or agreement, sense of aversion or identification on the part of the spectator, a subject looking at another subject portrayed in a work of art).

Eternal questions that the present climate of “hyper-democracy” and mass-taste dictatorship return to today.

Gerhard Richter on the one hand – as I was already saying about Monet and Cézanne – tends towards the absolute in painting, painting that no longer reports on the world (photography, films, video... took the task of adhering to reality away from painting long ago) but *speaks* only about itself, the canvas or another surface on which it is founded and manifests itself.

On the other hand – right here on the wall opposite the table I am writing at – Gilbert & George’s photograph sculpture *Morning Light on Art for All*, showing the two artists in an interior beside a window, invites us to *listen* to a silent scene, to a firm and composed expectation that echoes the vacuum image of the Ingres picture described above.

For my own part, I believe I stand at a midway point even though – let us remember – in art there are no arrangement criteria as there are, for instance, in politics; only the whims of History and Time, and all the “artist/actor” has to do is play his/her part. I am increasingly attracted, gripped by the question on the substance (or non-) of the image, of the *vision* before (or after) it is deposited as a *thing*, of the idea of a picture as an “independent body”, perspective or pure dimension... I believe the reason (one day in September 1960) I found myself being a painter was that I saw appear before my eyes and almost unknown to me the still unresolved enigma of the picture as an “original version”, a surface that is always true to itself and echoes or announces every possible image projection.

No answer; it is pointless to insist: “Art happens”.

“I wish I could write a book that was just incipit and maintained its initial potential throughout, the expectation still lacking an object. [...] Writers who want to annul themselves and lend a voice to what is outside them have two possible paths to choose from: either to write a book that can be the only book, that expends everything in its pages; or to write all the books, and pursue everything via partial images. The single book, containing all, could not be other than the holy book, the whole word revealed. But, I do not believe totality can be contained in language; my problem is what is left out, the un-written, the un-writeable. The only thing I can do is write all the books, write the books of all the writers possible”<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. *Voyage around my Room*

A short trip backwards will perhaps help us understand where we are now, i.e. in our room, still in the same place. This chapter repeats some excerpts from my writings on the concept of exhibition, once again the core argument of this project.

July 2001

If there is no exhibition without works, there is no work without exhibition.

The only, or at least the first artist to question something apparently so obvious was Yves Klein, who emerged unscathed from the acrobatic contradiction of having “exhibited” an empty room.

A few years later, Robert Barry managed to conceive an exhibition with no works and no place, indicating the addresses of eight different art galleries that, replacing each other, sent “visitors” back to the starting point and melted away into nothing.

Some time before, in contrast, Vincent Van Gogh had to sacrifice his life in order to manage to pass it on in his work.

But let us return to us, behind the walls that are most familiar to us, those hosting an exhibition. The artist and more importantly his work (yes, because in a certain sense the artist is the object of that elusive, enigmatic subject that is “his” work) do not resign themselves to the routine matters of ordinary living, to the “natural” course of things.

Being exhibited, made visible, is not therefore only the expected recognition demanded by the work but its essential complement, its very reason for accomplishment, the first and last true definition.

The intention, this time, is to concentrate all the exhibitions held before in a single exhibition – including those planned but never held and those still at the project stage, awaiting realization. If not all then those which, despite calling themselves such, did not make it obvious and clear what they were, that they were presenting works. In other words, the intention is to verify the exhibition moment when it calls into question the event's very *raison d'être* (or lack of it) – so, not a “theme” exhibition but the exhibition “that is the theme”<sup>10</sup>.

June 2002

The exhibition project (an exhibition that is both “retrospective” and “prospective”) will evoke twelve different places that have hosted as many of my works, over the years and on various occasions, and announce a new work not yet defined.

Twelve stations, on the two tracks (there and back) of a journey that does not seem to lead to a point of arrival true and proper. Empty spaces and moments, hovering between “flashbacks” and incomplete perspectives. Trails old and new, rediscovered or sighted “out of place” but on a dial that governs the work's own time and place: personal anthology focusing on past and future, far removed from the vortex of the present<sup>11</sup>.

March 2004

This time designing an exhibition will be a gamble, playing the game above board in two separate areas (called  $\alpha$  and  $\Omega$ ) in which Alpha, whether origin or first figure, is the Artist and Omega, the last moment of definition, is the work's final image.

If we observe the two different situations, the two different exhibition rooms and compare them one with the other, we are surprised to see the unknown hour X.

Who existed before whom? What is the first moment, the value of the unknown? I do not even know myself, at the moment, whether the words and drawings I am putting down on paper are original and come from my hand or are dictated by a pencil that seems anxious to break free from my hand and continue a drawing that belongs entirely and only to it<sup>12</sup>.

April 2005

An exhibition is an autonomous, virtual area... absolute and not relative to the place hosting it. It is not true and, above all, it is wrong to say that an exhibition interprets or reflects the surrounding space. An exhibition is not a mirror and so it does not reflect, or observe, this or that space; on the contrary, it establishes a different dimension (its own), which, by definition, goes beyond and transcends all existing material space<sup>13</sup>.

December 2006

Here and now: yes, now but where? In four different places, four different exhibitions will be inaugurated on the same day at the same time – each one consisting in four works (which, in turn, consist in four, sixteen and twenty-four elements). Works of different sizes but all falling within the square proportion, a perfect geometric figure that neither gives nor asks for explanations: a portion of space circumscribed by four sides of equal size, which each finds itself in its own place but could find itself in the other's place.

Where is, who is the artist? As always, we glimpse him *dans sa chambre*, in the studio, in the place where the artist assumes (or loses) his identity as a creator, according the primary, original and absolute value to the work and to himself the secondary role of actor, or stagehand, in the endless and grandiose (but silent) spectacle that is the History of Art.

The voice of the artist is neither one nor his own; different accents alternate to form a host of echoes and figures. The artist is mute and absent; the voice belongs to the work.

Nothing to add ... Just one thing remains to ask ourselves: what is his name? Could he be using another's name? Why not think that there is not *an artist* but that there is more than *one artist*, a different one each time, one for each exhibition or even for each work?

Why not question, step back from, the habit of conceiving the figure of the artist as the spokesman of an individual identity? All this without, of course, invoking an artist who is a member of a collective research group and, on the contrary, is an artist in the sense of pure executor, a clever and proper “employee”. We must not, however, ignore him; we cannot call him *Nobody* because he is actually *Somebody*, who remains unknown and does not speak in the first person.

The meaning (if we can speak of meaning) of an exhibition is not about the *who* or the *what*, who the artist is and what the works on show mean. A work will never grant anyone, ever, full possession of its particulars and the artist will only be the first witness chosen to execute the delicate mission of keeping a mysterious secret. It is, on the other hand, about the *how* and the *why*, i.e. the reasons (if there are any) that cause the curtain to rise on the performance.

#### 4. *Suite no. 4*

It is pointless to wonder; a work of art has nothing to say, no message to convey. Its voice is that which tells us of its very existence, its legitimacy, its recognition: the title that “sanctions” its belonging to the sphere of art. Yet, once again, we are forced to see the twists and abuse that the newspapers attribute to the concept of art and to the figure of the artist perpetually in the front line, a figure with an “intractable character, engaged in the task of observing the wretchedness of human life”<sup>14</sup>.

Error (horror)! That the artist should be the one to break the code of good manners, of his privileged condition, of his dual investiture of bachelor-exile of the world...

What about us, increasingly called upon to express ourselves (take sides, support, subscribe to...) and flaunt our names as “artists and intellectuals” in support of one opinion or another, to vote yes or to vote no; we respond as follows: with a vote of chastity.

A vote to maintain a fixed, unmoving gaze, directed at the vanishing point of the drawing consisting in four squares brought together to form just one, i.e.:

- 1) The four venues of the four exhibitions
- 2) The four works in each of the four exhibitions
- 3) The four elements in one of the sixteen works on show
- 4) The four parts of this text.

[pp. 34-44]

<sup>1</sup> F.O. Matthiessen (ed.), *Henry James. Stories of Writers and Artists*, New York: A New Directions Book, 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Marian Goodman and Yvon Lambert’s galleries both have two branches, in Paris and New York, thus providing the proper symmetry of places required to execute the “experiment”. There may also be an opportunity to repeat the project in another four premises, in another two cities in Italy (Milan and Bologna).

<sup>3</sup> *Giochi d’acqua*, Rome: Galleria Pieroni, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Book published by The Dovecote Press Ltd., Stanbridge/Wimborne/Dorset, 2005 (quoted by N. Aspesi, *Il ‘900 scandaloso dell’ultimo dandy*, in *La Repubblica* (Rome), 3 July 2005).

<sup>5</sup> *Turner, Whistler, Monet*, exh. cat., Paris: Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> J.L. Borges, in *Borges en diálogo. Conversaciones de Jorge Luis Borges con Osvaldo Ferrari*, 1985, and in the prologue to *La Rosa profunda*, 1975. Thanks to a few helping voices (Anna, Maddalena...) which jogged my sleepy memory, I was able to recall the sources of the quotes from Borges and Calvino in this text.

<sup>7</sup> L. Abélès, in *Turner, Whistler, Monet, op. cit.*, p. 163. *Ten O’Clock* is the title of the Whistler lecture, translated into French by S. Mallarmé in 1888.

<sup>8</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanisation of Art*, 1925.

<sup>9</sup> I. Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> *Esporre e sottrarre (tutte le mostre in una)*, in *Giulio Paolini*, exh. cat., Verona: Palazzo Forti, 2001, pp. 26-28.

<sup>11</sup> G. Paolini, *Quadrante. Viaggio intorno a un’idea di esposizione*, Rome: Edizioni dell’Oca, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Giulio Paolini. L’ora X*, exh. cat., Venice: Fondazione Querini Stampalia, 2004, pp. 27-30.

<sup>13</sup> *Giulio Paolini. Esposizione universale*, exh. cat., Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2005, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> This is the biographical profile of Lucian Freud, described and celebrated by the newspapers as an exemplary champion of a life lived "artfully", for the exhibition at the Museo Correr, Venice 2005.

Translation by Barbara Fisher. This text was published in booklet form on the occasion of Giulio Paolini's solo show at the galleries Yvon Lambert, Paris/New York and Marian Goodman, New York/Paris in winter 2006-07.

## WORDS BLOWING IN THE WIND

With no exaggeration, I think I can be placed among those contemporary artists who, in addition to their works, have said and written a lot in notes and interviews: a comprehensive, wide-ranging and at times reiterative bibliography testifies to this attitude – or bad habit – of mine, to conjure up images which are bound to be translated into written words.

Words blowing in the wind... with no rules or explanations but with references to and parallel versions of those images I always refer to; no theoretical writings or revealed truths, but metaphors to be added to the ones already expressed through those very images.

This notwithstanding, or maybe just because of this, unlike the artists who were here before me and probably undertook this task with greater care, I hardly managed to write a four-page speech to briefly introduce myself.

Each of those artists has brought something. I haven't... If anything, I bring with me a sort of dowry, an echo that is always with me and allows me to experience the perspective outlined by Leon Battista Alberti, and to see the light shining through the paintings of Fra Angelico or Giovanni Bellini. Moving from the transparencies of Perugino, we could, with a perceptive overtaking, suddenly find ourselves on the track of the exemplary journey of Lucio Fontana: heavenly vaults, sidereal routes leading us to a unique dimension, suspended in mid-air... facing a nothingness which fills the void.

If you will allow me a witty remark: I am the first Italian artist to free the territory from foreign occupation; indeed, all the artists invited here since the inception of the Ratti Foundation's courses as "visiting professors" – even the expression itself is foreign – have been foreign. But what does "foreign" mean? An artist is not so much a "foreigner" as a "stranger", a peculiar being who differs from the others and yet is the same as the artists who came before him, as well as those who will come after him.

I know nothing more about myself than that which is already widely known, but I still have a lot to learn about the artist's role, the body and place of the work of art, and about the role of the viewer.

These are the issues I am going to address one by one.

### *An Artist with No Name*

How is an artist born? What does an artist see?

After taking his first step (the author's *faux pas*), the artist closes his eyes... and concentrates on his own vision, to the exclusion of all else.

The artist is someone wandering in a void he feels forced to describe. The "object" is the transparent membrane, the very thin envelope of the "void" within which he is moving.

The artist is neither "inside" nor "outside" the world. At first we all look around, we are all viewers. Some of us like this world, others like it less and want to move somewhere else, to build something new and different: the "world" of art.

When facing each of his new works, the artist feels that he has finally found the truth – previously hidden and now suddenly revealed. But it is not so. He will have the same feeling (illusion) again and again, but he won't know the truth until he recognizes that it does not belong to him but to the work of art.

And not to that work of art but to another one.

He will always have the illusion of being ahead of the game, until his hands and eyes grasp the sign beyond the horizon – but he will never know when this happens.

That boundary that cannot be crossed makes us realize that we are excluded...

Those who express themselves are lost. Once again I want to stress that I have never tried to express myself through my work. I have always let my work speak for itself, (I demanded it) to state clearly what it was and from where it originated.

Different voices, from different ages, echo the serene and mindful silence of the artist's "voice".

In an interview, Paul Valéry said: "I do not know, I cannot know what I *meant*, but I do know what I wanted *to do*". And in *L'Amateur des Poèmes*, in the *Album de Vers anciens*, where the word "ancient" conveys the idea that this verses existed before him, before *he* wrote them as a *poet*, he writes: "Un poème est une durée, pendant laquelle, lecteur, je respire une foi qui fut préparée..."

As Beckett said: "... there is nothing to be expressed, nothing to express something by, no capacity nor desire to express, together with the duty to express". What more is there to say?

Carmelo Bene hurled the following invective: "The concept of BEING AN AUTHOR is a twofold lie: both in the idea originating it and in the stratagem that distorts this idea when realising it. The insane desire to express oneself, combined with the obsession to COMMUNICATE, generates the vicious circle of contemporary aesthetics... An exhausting search for an audience convened to endure such an annoying exhibitionism!".

"I would prefer not to". Following the example of "Bartleby the Scrivener", I too would prefer not to express myself.

Melville's sentence seems to echo Henry James' extreme discretion and touching modesty, or the ritual abstinence of Raymond Roussel – a master in extracting the gravity from words.

By a happy coincidence, some time ago I had the chance to attend a public meeting with Borges in Rome. When asked how a poem was written, he answered: "I don't do anything but wait". I'm trying to remember his exact words. Since his speech was translated, I cannot repeat exactly what he said but basically these are the words he used: "I wait, and my only concern is to create something beautiful. I have the feeling I am given a gift, but I do not know whether it comes from my own or someone else's memory, and I try not to intervene too much".

Finally, I would like to share a sentence with you: "Robinson, which of the lakes do I prefer?".

In this question asked by Beau Brummel to his *valet de chambre*, Bartleby's resolve neither to say nor to do anything becomes a forgotten, unuttered and above all unwritten choice. The dandy thus becomes master, but not maker, of an unbridgeable, heroic distance from the world, of a written language that is so elevated that it leaves nothing on the page, renouncing the space on the page to liberate itself from the emptiness of time.

In his latest essay, *Il secondo sguardo*, Massimo Pulini warns that "there was a time when the primary meaning of the word 'author' was: 'one who adds'. Once again, ancient Latin draws our attention to a meaning that returns to disillusion us about the idea of fatherhood, as though there were no absolute fatherhood but only countless, endless offspring, as though life and the world passed from hand to hand and in that short transition we were only allowed to smooth, add, or reshape a material and a form which have been handed down and probably existed before any of us"<sup>1</sup>.

### *The Body of the Work*

Each work of art bears within itself a rule unknown to the author but which he becomes aware of when he finally sees the work of art. The work of art is no spokesman either for the world or for the subject; it speaks a language of its own.

What we generally judge and appreciate to be the original and distinguishing style of an author is – by default – a hindrance the author cannot avoid.

Style (in a broader sense, the method or means the author must resort to) is thus a right of passage, the price he has to pay to view the work of art; works of art exist thanks to, but also in spite of, their authors.

The air, that very lightness so cherished by Italo Calvino, is no trivial thing, but rather a very serious matter: it means that we have to give voice to the words, not to the objects.

In an interview published in the catalogue of his latest exhibition at MoMA in New York, Gerhard Richter mentioned that years earlier in Munich he visited the exhibition "Contemporary Italian Art", where my work *Mimesi* was shown. He noted that, compared with a similar work of his, portraying two opposing heads (his and the head

of his friend, artist Blinky Palermo: two real sculptures, cast in bronze and featuring two real people), his work was more real, more intense, unique, compared to my “decorative game”.

In the last years of his life, Henri Matisse said that art, all art, eventually is decoration. I must correct Richter and comment on Matisse: given my high esteem for one and deep admiration for the other, I'd like to reconcile their viewpoints.

In his interview, Richter highlights his “classic” approach, namely the creation of a “real” painting or sculpture as against the casual use of the interchangeability of objects, typical of Pop Art (and he is definitely wrong when he associates me with that environment of simple effects).

When I place two identical copies of the same ancient statue one in front of the other, I do not aim to rediscover and recreate the statue, nor do I want to be delighted by the situation. My only aim is to focus on the distance, on the empty space between them, that is the true body of the work of art, bearing in itself, in the closed circuit of a cryptic answer, the question concerning its very existence. Hence the decorative effect: an induced and unexpected decoration as ultimate truth, as something “unaware” of the work of art, a decorative game that is more real than the illusion of truth.

In this respect I'd like to mention what Baldassarre Castiglione – a writer and very close friend of Raphael – said about “nonchalance”: a very elegant and precious feature of the work of art, it entails producing the most sublime effect without being pleased by or letting it be understood, without showing the effort and the intention behind the work but rather by being detached in order to convey the feeling that the work originated and materialized of its own accord.

I have just recognized that I nourish some doubts about an almost invariably hypothetical and alleged truth. But I'm not willing to place my trust in utopia: how can I practice something that is in itself impracticable? Utopia can be believed and accepted as an answer but not as a programme.

However, the prevailing trend seems to be the following: artists “with no boundary” rush into the slums of the largest cities to face the contradictions and hardships of everyday life. They discard the choice of representation and want to spring into action, an action supported by skilful “special effects”, aiming to have an immediate impact, without the mediation of the art language.

A document by the Pistoletto Foundation Cittadellarte goes even farther in that it mentions an “innovative relationship between art and the social framework; [...] the artist has the duty to connect the various human activities, from economics to politics, from science to religion... to reshape and reinterpret the world, to redefine the concept of civilisation, to link art to life”.

But what function, if any, has art ever performed? In other words: what certainty has the artist ever had about the function of (or at least the need for) his “work”, other than the need to be “operative”? What mysterious reason drives him, besides the sad awareness of his own gratuitousness?

The art-life equation is invalid and cannot remain long in equilibrium: compromise, the unfortunate attempt to join art and life together, will cause the loss of one or the other.

This being said, how can the artist set to work?

Let's try to summarize it in a single phrase, in only a few words – almost a slogan – a relevant and practicable principle.

To say “reduction to the absolute” might sound like a contradiction in terms: we long for, we aspire to, we strive for the absolute but do not reduce to it. To explain this paradox, I have to “remove” but also lift the support of the work of art, to turn it from a material into a statement or an image element. To look against the light, to see the filigree, the secret code, the hidden figure: signs remaining on the surface or passing through history, until they reach the point of equilibrium. In so doing, however, they needn't fall to the point of no return as exemplified by the excesses of Joseph Kosuth or of certain Anglo-Saxon conceptual art representatives, destined to “transfer art to the sphere of human sciences”<sup>2</sup> as Marco Senaldi wrote in a previous catalogue of this Foundation.

To sum up, the work of art can be compared to what is called a “black hole” in the cosmos, exactly the opposite of what, on this earth, namely at the latest Venice Biennale and now at Documenta in Kassel, has been defined a “platform”: “the scope of the artist's political and social commitment in a destabilizing world”.



The work of art does not dwell in the world but in the cosmos – a six-letter word that encompasses the whole universe, including Como.

### *The Glance of the Viewer*

“We often think that art is finished”, says Angela Vettese, bringing up an issue that has become fashionable of late. Over a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1876) attributed the cause of the decline of Greek tragedy and art to Socrates, because he was the originator of positive, scientific thinking. When Nietzsche applied these considerations to his own time, after having considered Wagner as the epitome of the reaction of art to the supremacy of scientific thinking, he feared that this restored equilibrium would one day in the future once again be lost (was he perhaps referring to the present time?). He wondered whether “the art net laid over existence would be woven more and more tightly or would be torn into pieces in the restless and barbaric turmoil now called ‘the present’?”.

Personally I still believe that Art is the only thing left, since History and Nature continue to inflict mutual disappointments.

I already stated that the author will never be able to hear “his” voice and to see “his” work. How can the viewer grasp the cryptic, elusive relationship between the author and his work or the connection between that work and those that came before and of which this is but one of the nth versions?

Like the author, the viewer too sees everything and nothing. In other words, he sees whatever he can perceive blindly and without any instructions for use. This is because Art possesses two precise attributes: revolution and discretion. By means of an acrobatic synthesis, it is able to combine the two.

### *Out of Place*

The current buzzword seems to be “new museums”. The concept “museum” was born in relatively modern times and it remains relevant. Many insist on a formula such as “open museum”, “lab-museum” or “site de création contemporaine”, as was the case on the occasion of the reopening of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Personally, I'd rather have a shut-in museum, sheltered from the outer world, in line with the “closed circuit” I mentioned earlier with regard to the author and the work of art.

The task of the museum is to offer fair hospitality: like the artist, who is the guest and not the author of the work of art, the viewer is a guest of the museum. He is not a customer to be entertained – which apparently has become the “catchphrase” of the new “*prêt-à-regarder*” museums.

The mistake of renewing at all costs, of shaking well before use, of deviating the course by changing the same old reference points is almost always inadequate: we should not set ourselves up to be third-millennium bohemians.

Provocative or paradoxical as it may sound, we could even state that to be alive, a museum should only exhibit works of artists who are alive artistically but dead according to the Registry. The work of art can only breathe time when it is detached from its author. Only then could the museum be considered “home of the work of art” and not a provisional, noisy space created for the sake of “newness”, in the name of a misunderstood and worn out “politically correct” philosophy. There is room for everyone, but apparently there is no place for anyone.

If I were to choose a sentence to be placed at the entrance to a Museum of Museums, I'd choose the words of Ecclesiastes (1.14): “What was is what will be, and what was done is what will be done”, recently retranslated eloquently by Guido Ceronetti: “What will be already was, and what will be done was done already”.

I'd like to close this topic by quoting Boris Groys: “Why does art want to be alive rather than dead? And what does it mean for Art to look as if it were alive? A museum infuses the sublime into the ordinary. According to the Bible there is nothing new under the sun. True. But the sun does not shine in a museum, and this probably explains why the museum has always been – and still is – the only place where innovation is possible”<sup>3</sup>.

### *Ex Cathedra*

To conclude – and I would like to address the students of this Course – with a piece of good news.

If it's true that all the experiences I have had contributed to changing some of my beliefs completely and to shaping the artist I have become (or rather, I think I am), as a teacher I am completely different – almost the opposite: I am apprehensive because I am untrained, unprepared for the task I have to accomplish, so I am really willing to learn more than how to teach basic concepts or useful and effective hints.

Furthermore, the loss of value of any model makes any possible acquired reference even more fragile and insubstantial.

Antonio Canova, the protagonist of the following anecdote, was well aware of that. One of his biographers and contemporaries told the story that “one day, a respectable knight was so impressed by a Venus by Canova that he wanted to know whether the artist had models of such unparalleled beauty, and kindly begged Canova to introduce him to one of them. A day was arranged for the meeting with the model and the lustful knight went to the appointment at Canova's studio. He was really surprised to see that the model was ugly, not a beauty at all. The sculptor, who was familiar with the woman, opened his heart and, smiling, told the knight that to see beauty in all its wholeness he had to use the eyes of his soul. This was the principle of art. Only in so doing could the artist see someone not as she was but as she had to be portrayed”.

Canova added: “Such an approach can only be learnt from the study of the ancients, from our common sense, our elegant taste and from our heart. Once you have trained the visual skills of your soul, you can set to work. You will overcome any difficulty and turn ugly objects into beautiful ones. This is precisely what I'd love to do. The more I become aware of it, the harder it gets to reach this goal. The eyes of my soul are not skilled enough to win this battle and thus I remain the mortal being I am”.

As to the function of courses – especially art courses that seem to follow their own evolution based on the denial of what is known – I'd like to mention two important examples.

“Professor” Borges said: “In my will, which I have no intention of writing, I would suggest reading a lot without being influenced by the writer's reputation. To enjoy reading means to pursue one's personal happiness. If you are bored by a book, no matter if it is *Don Quixote*, drop it. It was not written for you”.

Faithful to this imaginary “last will”, Borges talks only about the writers he cherishes and knows best. He aims to make people love literature, while the government programmes seem to be conceived with the intention of making people hate it. When the University of Buenos Aires asked him to teach a course they knew what they were doing, or at least what to expect. Unlike the other candidates, who submitted biographies and publications, Borges just made the following statement: “Without realising it I have been preparing for this course my whole life”. Evaluating himself as a teacher he confessed: “I didn't teach the students English literature – that I am not at all familiar with – but I taught them to love some writers, or rather some pages or some sentences: you fall in love with a sentence, then with a page and then with a writer”.

Richard Feynman, a physicist, states explicitly that his aim is not to bore the best students. So he amuses them with fireworks, while keeping the core of the lesson within the reach of the average student; but he is afraid he has not been successful. More pessimistically Feynman, paraphrasing Edward Gibbon, thinks that such a target won't ever be reached: “Generally speaking, teaching is pointless, except for those students who would consider it superfluous”<sup>4</sup>.

[pp. 47-58]

<sup>1</sup> M. Pulini, *Il secondo sguardo*, Milan: Medusa, 2002, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> M. Senaldi, “I Wrote I love You in the Sand”, in *Haim Steinbach*, Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2000 p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> B. Groys, “On the New”, in I. Kabakov, *Public Projects or the Spirit of a Place*, Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2001, p. 339.

<sup>4</sup> These two last quotations by Borges and Feynman are taken from an article by P. Odifreddi, in *Il Sole 24 ore* (Milan), 13 January 2002.

English translation published in *Giulio Paolini*, Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2003, pp. 18-25.