

GIULIO PAOLINI



ART AT ROOM TEMPERATURE

WORDS BARRY SCHWABSKY

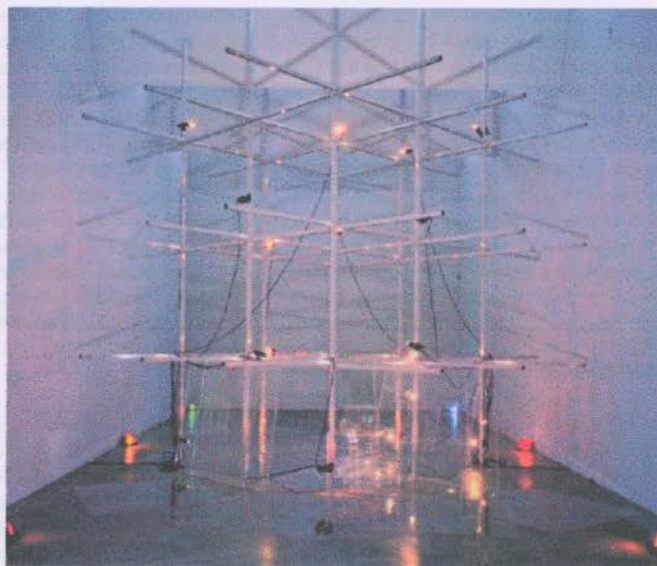
GIULIO PAOLINI, WHO was born in 1940 and is most associated with *Arte Povera*, has written that 'Every work of art is already in itself a museum.' Perhaps that's why it felt important to me to encounter at least once the artist in his studio: because (it seemed logical) if every work is a museum, then every studio must already be a work of art. In each case, it is (as Paolini once recalled what he glimpsed on his first museum visit) 'a closed – but also unlimited – universe from which I would have been neither able nor willing to separate myself'. And the studio, like the museum, like the work itself would be an almost closed-off world, almost but not quite sheltered in itself.

But what I found on entering Paolini's studio, situated in a courtyard not far from the piazza Vittorio Veneto in central Turin, hardly looked like a studio (and therefore, one might argue, still left like a work of art). Rather, it is an office, perhaps something like that of an architect with a small-scale practice. A pair of desks, many books, files, archives. A place for thinking more than for looking. I think of what Paolini wrote about his exhibition at the Fondazione Prada in 2003: 'The object's there, but it can't be seen because we aren't allowed to see it' so that 'the gaze closes, finding itself the object of itself.' The true object is the invisible nucleus of what we do see.

Thus, in the studio, there was next to nothing to see, and I began by asking Paolini about this. 'I become visible, you might say, only when there is an exhibition,' he explained. 'I don't show things already made which are then gathered together to form the exhibition. I scrutinise the situation and create the exhibition with that space in mind. And then the things I show are not made here in the studio. If I need a photograph, I have a photographer take it, I don't take it myself. This studio is not a place for "touching" things.' So what happens in such a studio? 'Nothing,' he laughed. 'It's not a factory. But I'm rooted in this space. It's a place where I can take a distance, a place for concentration.'

As we'd begun to converse, I pulled out my notebook and began scribbling – the hand's mad race to keep up with the ear. Its notable lack of success constitutes the first round of editing. The artist expressed his surprise (and I think he was pleased) that I still use this antiquated technology instead of a digital recording device. I explained to him my theory of in-the-moment editing, but neglected to mention my fear that although I could understand his Italian perfectly in person, in the abstract form of a disembodied voice I might make out almost nothing.

Paolini asked what brought me to Turin. The answer was easy: to see him, no other reason. I explained that I'd first seen his work as long ago as



Opposite: *Immacolata Concezione. Senza titolo / Senza autore, 2007–08*

Above: *Esposizione universale, 2005.*

1982, before I'd even thought of becoming an art critic. It was at the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan, an exhibition called *La Caduta di Icaro (The Fall of Icarus)*, whose resonances are still with me, and which initiated a fascination with Paolini's work that I've never lost. I remember thinking that the use of mythology reminded me of Joseph Cornell – only here the exhibition space itself was the box and I was inside it. I was fascinated by how the whole thing felt so cool, precise and analytical, and yet the theme of the fall – of death meted out to ambition – was grandiose and tragic. Gradually, as I got to know more about his work, I began to see *La Caduta di Icaro* as one moment in a gradual unfolding that had begun some 20 years earlier, an unfolding that has continued without interruption until this day.

The artist agreed that his oeuvre has been built with this sense, not of repetition, but of continuity.

'I make reference to the parabola of my work,' he said. This I had to ponder: in Italian, the word *parabola* has two meanings, being both a mathematical term, as in English, referring to a conic section, a curve describing the trajectory of an object in motion (under the influence of a gravitational field but without friction), but the word can also be translated as *parable*, the literary form we associate with the New Testament, as well as with Franz Kafka, an extended metaphor that conveys a hermetic truth. Which sense was Paolini using? My immediate thought was that he was talking about the movement of his work through time. And yet I could not shake the other overtone – the idea that he was alluding to the idea of the development of an artist's work as a narrative with symbolic significance. 'The work is a continuum,' Paolini resumed. 'When I make an exhibition, I'm not only projecting what I am doing now, but my whole trajectory. Being an artist means belonging to something that continues, something remains. Maybe by predetermination.' He laughed, adding, 'Not that I'm superstitious!'

In spite of his links with *Arte Povera*, as Germano Celant named the movement in 1967, Paolini has always been an odd man out when you consider how most of the other *poveristi* were fascinated with the poetics of materials, the politics of the ephemeral, and the breakdown of the boundaries between art and everyday life. Paolini was immune to all this; in 2003 he even cited a document from Cittadellarte, the *fondazione* set up by Michelangelo Pistoletto, as a summation of what he finds impracticable in contemporary art: its search for 'an innovative relationship between art and the social framework'; the idea that 'the artist has the duty to connect the various human activities, from economy to politics, from science to religion' – making clear the distance between his position and that of another of the

great exponents of Arte Povera. Paolini's endeavour has always been to analyse the conventions of art more than to overcome them. Rather than seeking to innovate, he has looked for the eternal in art – to find that which might always already have been there, and which the individual artist need only unveil.

This analytical bent, along with an inclination toward visual and material austerity – so different from the sensual engagement offered by a work by, say, Mario Merz or Giuseppe Penone – makes it tempting to think of Paolini as something more like a conceptual artist than a *poverista*. But the artist himself is sceptical of this connection. 'The singularity of my work,' he told me, 'comes from the fact that – in contrast to a conceptual position, at least in the Anglo-American sense – it does not equate language and art. These are two polarities that my work seeks to respect. My work is always the vehicle of an image. And I don't think of my work as cold. It has two poles, hot and cold. As a result there is, you might say, a work at room temperature' – at least I think that is the most appropriate way to translate Paolini's phrase: '*un lavoro tiepido*'.

At this point I needed clarification. It's easy to feel the coolness of Paolini's work. But where is its 'hot' side? In Paolini's view, it's in the ardour with which the work is realised, 'in my attention to its formal aspect. Every artist has his own obsession. This is mine, the passion that the works be composed in a certain way and no other.' It's a passion that is undemonstrative, undramatised, but constant. 'Even with the works where the classical image seems to be ruined, like the works in broken plaster, still, there is always a fascination for the classical.'

IT'S THIS FASCINATION with the classical that sets Paolini apart from other artists of his generation – even or especially his fellow Italians, the nation who invented classicism. I can't help but be curious about what it signifies and what its origins might be – this tropism toward, say, Poussin over Caravaggio, Canova over Rodin. 'For me,' he explained, 'the classical means the continuous mode of art – the formal, composed element that's always there, art's destiny and permanence. I recognise that there is another side to art, the romantic, but it's less congenial to me. That's not to say I refuse the romantic altogether. I'd rather say that the classicists are my family – the romantics, honoured guests.'

Likewise, Paolini's work – from the very beginning, with *Disegno Geometrico* (1960), a white canvas divided by four lines, two from corner to corner and two from the centre of each side to the opposing side – has always concerned the act of measurement and the theory of proportions. 'Artistic language in general – whether referring to music, visual art, or any other – is free, it enters into unknown territories. But to be grasped, this unknown must find its rule. Not in the way of science or politics or other human activities in which the rule must be universally observable – instead, every must find his or her own. For each artist there exists a secret code, which even he doesn't know but which he nonetheless possesses and applies and renders perceivable.' Perhaps this sums up the contradiction that constitutes Paolini's own secret code: the idea of an idiosyncratic classicism, a universal ideal that is peculiar to the artist who conceives it.

Paolini's is an analytical art, but not a reductive one. That's why its continuity is not that of mere repetition; his oeuvre is a universe in constant, steady expansion. Among the things that make this possible is the fact that his analysis of the pure idea of art has never entirely eliminated its narrative element. The stories, the legends that art has illustrated and rendered vivid in human memory are not external to it; they, as much as its formal elements,



are part of its essence. Again and again, Paolini has turned to classical myths – to the tales of Narcissus, Mnemosyne, Apollo and Daphne – as well as to the myth of art itself as embodied in its protagonists, from Raphael and Lorenzo Lotto to contemporaries like Jasper Johns. 'But my work doesn't present narratives,' he corrected me. 'It carries reverberations of narratives and myths. I feel a need to avoid closing myself into a purely theoretical discourse on art. These ancient narratives produce an echo that fills the void left by theory. I

show the elements of artistic representation. Each work is the answer to its own question. It demonstrates the fact that it exists. But this existence is not exhausted in showing itself; it always conveys a further reference. Compared to the Anglo-American understanding of conceptual art, I think this is a less rigid or categorical discourse. The work is not the thing we are looking at but a mirror in which we glimpse something of the history of art. It not only shows its uniqueness but its part in history.' A certain abstract art, and following it a certain conceptual art, wished to eliminate anything anecdotal from the work. Paolini puts the anecdote at a distance, yet its shadow continues to fall over the work, if only, sometimes, by way of a title.

Art's history extends forward as well as backward. Sensing that I've taken up enough of the artist's time here in the studio where his art's future invisibly and intangibly starts to take form, I finish with the obvious question: what's next on his agenda? 'I want to do several shows all using the same theme,' he responded. 'I want to concentrate my attention on exhibitions that one central element in common – that they seem to evoke the necessity to realize a work and also its impossibility. They should have a title in common: *Senza più titolo* – not "untitled", but rather "no more title" or "no longer titled".' I've encountered works that were *Not Yet Titled* – the first one I remember was by Cady Noland, though I've since come across examples by Banks Violette and others – but *No Longer Titled* is new to me. It seems to point to the idea of a work that is in the process of losing its identity, of dissipating. 'You know it's a work, but you don't know why,' said Paolini. 'It's lost its memory. It occupies a space which it no longer understands or recognises. It's losing its aura.' The risk of art losing its memory, its identity, its aura, is inevitable once it refuses that other great risk, that it becomes hermetically sealed off, complete, and sterile. Art may refer to the eternal but it exists in time. Like Icarus, it's always heading for a fall.

For a classicist, this idea of an amnesiac work must be the greatest nightmare. It seems that Paolini's art is moving into a dark phase. But there's no arguing with the timeliness of his concern. It sounds like his 'no longer titled' works will offer an immediate diagnosis of the situation of art today. Yet I suspect they will also offer the possibility of an inoculation against the condition they identify. There is anguish in Paolini's vision of art, as represented by that fall that caught my imagination in Milan in 1982, but also serenity. It is, as he says, an art at room temperature.

This tension or even self-contradiction, for all the composure with which Paolini seems to contemplate it, is crucial. It's the reason why his art – as spare and minimal as it may seem – is never simply tautological. The work never coincides with itself, and this why (against the precepts of the very classicism it proclaims) it never achieves closure, never becomes what Descartes called a clear and distinct idea; this is the reason why it has, not only a past, but a future. ■

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Opposite: Apoteosi di Omero, 1970-71, installation view at Galleria Giò Marconi, Milan, 2007

Above: La caduta di Icaro, 1981, installation view at Documenta 7, Kassel, 1982; below: Disegno geometrico, 1960

