

# HOW LONG IS TOO LONG? A LIFE-LONG GAZE

Giulio Paolini's formidable account  
of his own talent

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**CARLO ANTONELLI** Square, ruler, protractor, compasses. We inevitably start at school, in Genoa, and from after school.

**GIULIO PAOLINI** Yes, once my school duties were over, I gave myself over even more to perceptual amusements, namely image and sound. Yet, sound was sacrificed, because it was so far away, a utopia. Instead, I felt I could continue... I went to visit exhibitions, to Palazzo Bianco in particular. In the summer at my grandparents' I wasn't guarded like kids are these days, they mostly stay at home. I used to spend days wandering around Genoa, especially in old Genoa. I liked the Romanesque churches, San Matteo, Santo Stefano. San Cosma and Damiano. Wonderful.

**CA** Wonderful.

**GP** Those very tours gave me the conviction that we could live as we wanted, in our own way.

**CA** Why?

**GP** Because I felt that dimension there, in those Romanesque voids, was mine, let me tell you... I remember that there was a Madonna by Barnaba da Modena, in San Cosma and Damiano, and I—even though I had no calling to religious faith—was fascinated by the spatial dimension of those interiors, where there was no one.

**CA** The old town was empty, it had been bombed.

**GP** They had had a life before, let's say.

**CA** You said: "To live as one wanted." Maybe that's the oddest thing I've heard, relating to a church. You are talking about a dimension of spatial harmony, of silence and rarefied image but also of suspended time.

**GP** Of absolute beauty, simple but pure: suspended time. State of grace.

**CA** Were you a quiet boy?

**GP** Quiet? Yes, absolutely.

**CA** That's what you were saying, that is, being as you would like to be. It was a dimension that matched how you were. We had, however, begun by talking about Palazzo Bianco.

**GP** Ah! Eh, Palazzo Bianco... Yes, that is also important, in my opinion. Almost like the church of Cosma and Damiano. I used to go out alone, all day long. And my grandparents would let me go, because they weren't afraid I would do who knows what. I was so captivated by these great paintings... It was the first museum I set foot in. There was a silence there too... there was no one there. These enthralling images made me forget closing time; the attendants, in short, came and said, "what are you doing?" I mean, they caught me... I was a bit, how should I say, absent-minded...

**CA** Dazed. Listen, weren't they part of Franco Albini and Franca Helg's set-up?

**GP** That's exactly what they were.

**CA** This is very important.

Carlo Antonelli  
Giulio Paolini

GP Albini was also later an architect for me, like Carlo Scarpa, who was close to my affection and admiration.

CA Also because the "frame" and the support and in some cases the glass, as it were, spatially and geometrically suspended the painting. It's a way we see recurring in the things you do as well. There is a certain way of looking at things.

GP Yes, of sealing.

CA Yes. Also of sealing the antique.

GP Yes, and also, how should I say... to bring it back from being forgotten and preserved to the dimension of existence, of visibility. Let's go back to 1959 and it was, I think, September. I had not yet turned twenty, I would have been twenty in November 1960. And I stopped, at this point, with the doodles, with the lines drawn at will on sheets of paper. I went to the attic of my house, which was really a small room full of suitcases and things. I set up a sort of inclined plane and some free planes for tools. In short. And there, making the 40x60 cm canvas with my own hands, fixed with nails on the frame, I felt I had risen to the occasion: first I traced the white on the canvas, then, with a tyroplane some thin, red and black lines. I did what I thought was a completed painting. Because, precisely, I sensed—without theorizing—its infinite potential. Here is the Geometric Drawing. And, when someone asked me, "but why did you, so young, do that weird painting?," with a bit of thought, I replied, "because I took the vows." But I insist, they were not the vows of

the church of Saints Cosma and Damiano. They were the vows of being able to feel what you are (or are not) to be (or not to be).

CA Ahhh.

GP That was just the first step, fixing the handmade cloth (I had no money to go and buy it). That had been like a dressing. The threshold of a convent.

CA And then?

GP And then that's it. Because, as you know, this is my first and last painting. I am virtually always in that moment and in that small space. Even if yes, I try to get out of it, I am always there. ♦

GIULIO PAOLINI

Giulio Paolini (1940) has exhibited in galleries and museums all over the world. His work can be found in renowned public and private collections both nationally and internationally. Paolini focuses his poetics on a conceptual dimension, on the constituent elements of a painting, on the space of representation, on the relationship between the work and the viewer, as well as on the figure of the author.





