

GIULIO PAOLINI IN CONVERSATION WITH HANS-ULRICH OBRIST

HUO: What were the initial stages of your work with the theatre and set design like?

GP: It began in 1969, at the Teatro Stabile in Torino, with quite a didactic play, a tragedy by Alfieri. From that point it continued irregularly. I got to know Carlo Quartucci, an avant-garde director who was the same age as Carmelo Bene. Quartucci knew me as an artist and a set designer. A collaboration developed which totally distanced me from my initial work with stage sets. It wasn't a question of setting anymore but of "scenic composition with four hands" which the visual creator and the theatre author participated in. We planned different scenic situations, theatre events / happenings, which were no longer performances. The scenic action was more important than the spoken word. What happened on stage belonged to the visual repertory. This collaboration resulted in the so called *Plateaus* as well as other experimental performances such as Kleist's *Penthesilea*.

HUO: Did these performances always take place at the same location?

GP: No. The theatre was no longer suitable for these experiments. We found other locations, e.g. Castello di Gennazzano, where we rehearsed, performed and worked as if we were in a laboratory. Then the works found their place not to be the world of theatre but of art, especially when they were invited to be part of the Biennial in Venice in 1986. Alongside this however, I continued designing stage sets and costumes for the theatre, two years ago for example for a Ballet performance in the Maggio Musicale

in Florence which was a free arrangement of Pasolini's *Teorema*.

HUO: Did your closeness to the theatre manifest itself in your artistic work right from the beginning?

GP: In 1984 I was invited to Pesaro by Galleria Franca Mancini. Artists, who had a special affinity to theatre, exhibit there every year during the Rossini Opera Festival. I therefore showed works which had something to do with the theatre in themselves but I tried to put them in some order in the gallery's exhibition space, whereby they evoked some kind of theatre atmosphere in the way they were grouped. I had a similar intention for my first exhibition in 1964 at Galerie La Salita in Rome, when I was still exhibiting actual paintings. The effect should not originate from the individual painting but from the show as a whole. The works did not have their own language but a language became evident in their entirety. My affinity to the theatre has been here from the very beginning, it nevertheless becomes clearer and more conscious later on. In 1981, I had an exhibition called *The Fall of Icarus* in Milan where I used the exhibition space as if it were a stage. My relationship to the theatre becomes quite concrete here, the transition to a work which stretches out in a space and occupies its whole surroundings. A "theatre optic" can already be perceived in my *Disegno geometrico* from 1960, "the theatre order" in which the exhibition space becomes part of my artistic concept, develops years later.

HUO: Can you tell us something about the dimension of time which is a topic which you have always worked on?

GP: At the beginning I did not know anything

about theoretical notions. After a few years I had developed a critical reflexive component alongside my art work. After 10 years I was aware of the co-ordinates which allowed not only my work but also the specific features of the artistic work to be depicted. This is the way I arranged an exhibition in 1970 of 14 reproductions of one photo from 1960. The original drawing appeared 14 times with 14 different imaginary titles and artists' names. I was convinced that after 10 years of work I had returned to the beginning and had to start again. The artist's work is not something which grows to come to results but always returns and must, therefore, start from the beginning again.

HUO: Could you say a few words about the dialogue you had with Borges and Calvino?

GP: There are a few authors who have influenced me through the treatment of images, for example Borges and above all Calvino. These authors conveyed to me a consciousness of certain similarities between art and literature. There are still such transmissions today however the "canon" has changed. Today it is no longer about books but more about cinema and video.

I don't find this change dangerous. There is, however, a danger of a confusion of notions, taking into consideration how information mass is growing in all knowledge areas and the pressure which arises from it. This can result in a feeling of being a fraud when too many things come together and it becomes impossible to determine the few things which are really useful to us.

HUO: Do you think there can be a synthesis of diverse art?

GP: No. Artists, painters, writers concentrate intensely on their own disciplines and do not

breathe the same air. Also if the young artists today are interested in what their colleagues are up to there is paradoxically no actual stylistic relationship between them.

HUO: In a former interview, you spoke about the "sickness of acceleration".

GP: I feel as if I am an archaeologist when I use paintings as language. The things are present and they are simply uncovered. I feel like an archaeologist when I draw a straight line across a piece of paper. Even as brand new, this line is charged with history, no matter how banal it may be.

HUO: Let's turn back to the theatre as a participation space.

GP: Theatre makes the concepts of all art forms explicit. Theatre space is very close to me, it is a kind of compendium of art development, like a "Chinese Shell" out of which the concept of the art work unfolds. What we see on the theatre stage is the non plus ultra of artistic representation. Next to the diverse artistic forms of expression – tone, text, images – there are dimensions of space and time which lend the performance on the stage a sort of absoluteness. Even if a play is performed several times it will have something special about it each time and it is exactly this unrepeatability which makes theatre extraordinary and unique.

HUO: Let's move away from the theatre and look at the opera and the project for Vienna. Have you worked for the opera before?

GP: I have worked twice with opera houses to date. The first time was in 1971 for *Laborintus II* by Luciano Berio, directed by Quartucci at the opera house in Genoa. I did the stage design. The performance went down with boos and protest from the audience which was rather conservative.

A rebellion! The performance went beyond the stylistic specialities of the score. The result was catastrophic.

I then worked again for the Genoa opera house, for the first performance of *Colloquio con Malcolm X* by Giorgio Gaslini directed by Carlo Quartucci. This time, the audience found the stage design acceptable. Vienna is the third opera house I am working for, although not for the stage but for the creation of the safety curtain.

HUO: How do you envisage your work for the curtain in Vienna?

GP: To start with there was a small collage which appears here as a massive enlargement. It is the processed reproduction of a stage curtain which covers the real safety curtain. The golden borders of the curtain become a central picture frame in my work, where the picture of a star filled night sky is visible. In this sky, stage props seem to float: tripods, ladders, small objects. Here they act as if they belong to a secret space behind the stage.

HUO: Was this small collage the starting point? Where do the single elements come from?

GP: From a monography about the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. I reproduced the excerpts, cut them out and mounted them for this imaginary scene. They refer to the pleasure of disclosure, whereby the elements of the picture only become visible through the pathos of this gigantic frame and the red and golden paint representing pomp and ceremony. Those elements are not at all pretentious, they are simply objects such as used for theatre work. Their order in the picture is unsymmetrical and meaningless, they appear as if they are in layers on top

of one another and have fallen into the picture by chance. The curtain opens up from the center to show us something unplanned and unprepared. The blue sky, a part of the backdrop itself, stresses the effect of immediacy. Night and stage are related.