

The Author Who Thought He Existed (Curtain: Darkness Falls Over the Auditorium)

Giulio
Paolini

Once again, I wish to ponder on and emphasize my particular conception of the figure of the artist, not as an autonomous and original individual, but as the everlasting and impersonal interpreter of the same unchanging role: an irreplaceable, and yet invisible subject, he has taken on various names in various eras. A central presence/absence in the uninterrupted orbit of the genealogy that presides over art history: history as the “preservation of the species (of beauty)”, in the endless dilemma between “being and not being” in the world.

The artist’s attitude seems to outline the same passages that distinguish a vocation, something impenetrable and mysterious, similar to a fit of madness or an obsession.

I am neither here nor elsewhere... I simply am not: the artist is not “out of this world”, nor is he “in this world”. To conceive a work is not something that is “entitled” to be affirmed, that takes place in the present, but something that turns from the past to the future and triggers the memory of an afterwards. The artist does not want to speak, to communicate in a direct form, in real time: he does not want to impose his voice, rather, he wants to listen, capture an echo... Hence, nothing to be declared, except for the right to be able to affirm it, to observe the silence without being forced to justify it.

The “truth” of the artist is not the author’s: it belongs – it already did – to the work. The truth of the work is that hidden, pre-existing given (a given that is not given) that it is up to the artist to recognize and reveal to the expectation of our gaze. A painting announces itself, but it does not come true. The image that a work delivers to us is not something that is formulated and defined forever; rather, it is something that always reaches us by return.

On Ideal Beauty

Beauty appears to us against the light. We attribute to it the features that our eyes have been educated to see “live”, but that don’t really belong to it and aren’t enough to configure it, to give it a face. Hence, we are not content with what is “naturally” owed to us... and are forever pushed towards an unknown, amidst a tension that is condemned to remain unfulfilled. The purpose of art is not nature, as Oscar Wilde knew full well; and even less so truth. The dandy does not dwell in the *polis*, but outside

the world instead. It is the evocation of a new Thebaid, of a separate region, or a “Grand Oasis”, where virtuality and illusion seem to dispute the conquest of the void, that is, where art’s soundless word can resound in the room sealed by a ciphered code.

Hermit or cenobite? The role (or the fate) of the author hovers on the edge, either forward or backward, between two apparently opposite and irreconcilable polarities: it is precisely from an unsurpassable threshold that one can touch, embrace the whole world, intact, just as it is, not disputed or controlled by those who inhabit it and possess it. Where the grandiose pavilions, the stentorian and demonstrative architectures of a (less and less) Universal Exposition would implode, for example, into the delicate balance of the shelter built on Walden Pond by Henry David Thoreau back in 1845. “If you really wish to do anything, resign your office”. Resign, let your investiture end... this is the highest promotion we can hope to deserve. Those words are not just his and I allow myself to extend them to all the other voices that have given us wood to burn in the flames of writing and vision: voices that, overlapping our own, generate a boundless identity destined to arrive in unison (or in silence). As spectators we find ourselves watching the different episodes that move by across the horizon in an uninterrupted itinerary, observing them from afar. Art does not say, it does not know what to say... it does not know, it cannot reason, but nor does it intend to totally evade the terrain we are given (or that is imposed) for our practice.

Belonging, not performing, is what contact with the realm of art is asking for. No one, the artist least of all, can have access to the absolute of the “truth”, as we must all limit ourselves to pursuing the goal – a relative one – of perfection: an absolute that is indeed relative because it “perfectly” matches the many voices that regulate the flow of communication.

The Exact Time

The world (of art) is chock-full, bursting with clamorous voices and gestures dictated by the “determinism” of the authors and by their salvific or fundamental missions, communicated and handed down with the flag-waving cry of “art that will save the world”. Performances, preachings, precepts and invocations... voices aimed at proposing (or imposing) solutions that haven’t been requested and, above all, are unnecessary to the sacrosanct autonomy of the “impassible” beauty that Winckelmann had already attributed to the realm of art. Voices – including my own insistent and contradictory exhortation to silence – that Time will take care of reshaping or even forget. Precepts and invocations that should give way to a compliance with the rules of the game, with the “superior” principles ascribed, that is, to something pre-existing: not, for instance, those modest expedients that in politics allow for the announcement of taking “steps forward”, remedied by a trajectory that has no vanishing point. To “mark time” is instead the expression in code, the password that allows the author to keep his distance and not raise his voice.

Art itself is dialogue (with Time, with History) and therefore it cannot pretend or presume to be susceptible to a search for the truth that it already possesses or thinks it possesses. It cannot and must not update or once again question the “truth”

that guides it. It is not a building that is constantly being rebuilt or refurbished, an open construction site; rather, it is a secret itinerary, with no destination, no place, no date.

In This day and Age

The urgency that overcomes me is driven by the growing disconcertment that I experience repeatedly before the nagging and grotesque preoccupation expressed by nearly all of the contemporary art world as concerns the fate of the world (the real one), and by our need to be responsible for it and bear it on our shoulders.

What vanity and, above all, what an immense superiority complex, what a feeling of omnipotence! Hence we, infinitesimal inhabitants of the Universe, should rise up to become the defenders of what we are due: and I stress these words in order to affirm our marginality, which is certainly not centrality, within a cosmogony that we, however, have no knowledge of.

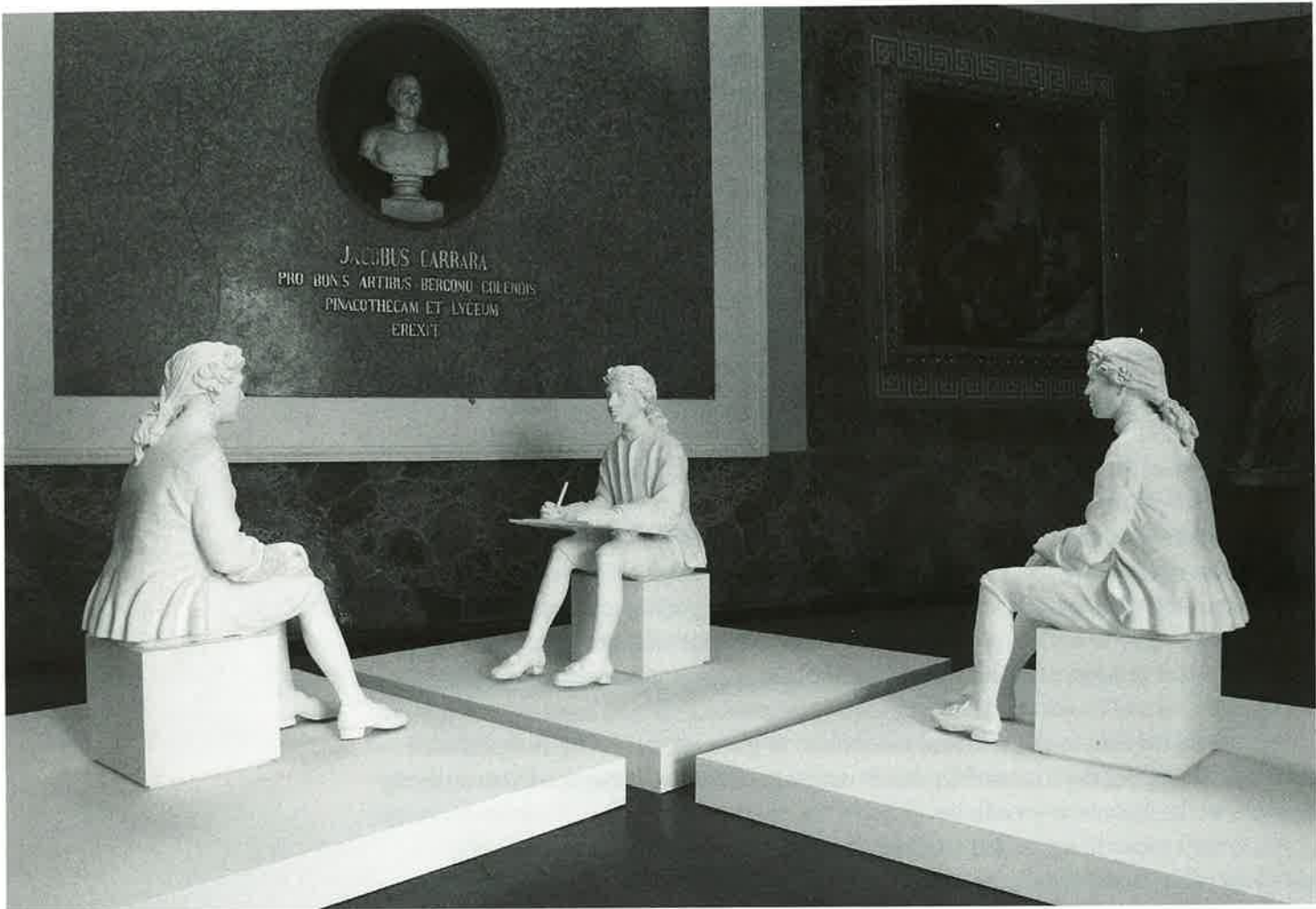
In a word, it is the gratuitous nature, the futility of politics (and anti-politics): of the presumption – to say the least – that authorizes us, that truly makes us believe we are the authors of a story in which we move about as mere actors or extras, penniless and jobless... And I'm not just referring to the comprehensible and legitimate indignation provoked by our national affairs but, in general, to the free and professed choice of "doing politics": an unforgivable concession that the noble condition of being entrusts to the diabolical greediness of being there.

What I mean to say is that attention is by now turned towards the data of a sociology of art that embodies the true and proper "mortal sin" committed to the detriment of the primary essence, the "archaeological" vocation, of that digging deep into the single dimension that is always the same and always different that enlives the realm of art.

Blackout

Silence is the word of art, intercepted and safeguarded by that upside-down antenna whose task is to perceive and to preserve those certain signals: not so much the relics, as the themes that have always ruled the increasingly meaningful aspects of its becoming.

In short, I intend to pay devout tribute to the patience and the observation of the archaeologist, to the vocation of the amanuensis monk, both consecrated to the transcription of those traces that antiquity, akin to contemporaneity, has handed down to us, beyond the clamour aroused by the voices that occupy the everyday scene.



To be or To Represent Oneself

[fig. 4]

Tre per tre (ognuno è l'altro o nessuno), 1998-99

Let each person choose for himself, obviously, without forgetting, though, a rule, a healthy principle of good manners. Never mix up roles and situations: those who believe they know themselves must avoid instructing others about their own existence and abstain from representing themselves. On my part, I shall just suggest a simple switching of letters in two Italian words that is not merely a pun: two words in which an “a” can replace an “e”, *estetico* thus becomes *estatico*, that is to say, aesthetic becomes ecstatic. Ecstasy as though exiting from oneself. Could this almost imperceptible spelling alteration really be capable of causing a dimension to explode from one size to another, of extending the trajectory helpful in continuing along our path? To venture forth, go beyond... Yes, but where and why? It is often the case that certain authors (especially writers) who have reached the age of maturity and in some ways the completion of their *opera omnia*, before they “forever hold their peace”, choose voluntarily to bid adieu to writing and to any further publication.

Painters, sculptors, architects and musicians are generally less willing to stop:

could it be that writing as such is the expression and thus the explicit and “spoken” communication that becomes aware of its “error” sooner?

I wonder: wouldn't it be apt and fitting for an author to, at least *in extremis*, enact a choice that corrects the equivocation underwritten until just before? Why did we, until yesterday, see ourselves as authors, in other words, why did we think that we existed, thus giving a voice to the buzzing of the mind rather than handing ourselves over to the ecstatic silence of the soul? And why does an author so solemnly enjoy announcing his or her resignation?

For a long time now, beginning with Rimbaud and perhaps down to Forster and Salinger, the author has always felt compelled to have a place from which he can subtract himself. As pointed out in a recent article by Valerio Magrelli in regard to the Bartleby syndrome described by Enrique Vila-Matas: “One does not write for oneself, but rather for others, and in this sense quitting means suspending contact with the Other, who is the reader *par excellence*. This is the reason why, when a writer gives up the page, he is not so much erasing his own future, as his future relationship with the public, and therefore, said writer is silent, surrenders, turns his back on the community to which he belongs, which becomes an orphan of his voice”.

Right Now

Hence, everything, or almost everything, seems destined to vanish but at the same time – and it is truly a question of Time – to remain as well. The famous image originally suggested by Parmenides to Emanuele Severino who talks about it today comes to mind: it's the image of the flame that we think we can simply blow out, but that “in truth” is still lit and continues to be so... Like when I find myself considering and repeating “my first (and last) painting”. Or the words that end Jorge Luis Borges' short piece of fiction *The Yellow Rose*: “Then the revelation occurred. Marino *saw* the rose as Adam had seen it in Paradise, and he realized that it lay within its own eternity, not within his words; and that we might speak about the rose, allude to it, but never truly express it, and that the tall, haughty volumes that made a golden dimness in the corner of his room were not (as his vanity had dreamed of them) a mirror of the world, but just another thing added to the world”.

Quite the opposite of the sombre and conflictual theories propagandized until yesterday by the last offshoots of so-called “conceptual” art (see Joseph Beuys, Ai Weiwei...), art that is corrupted and compromised by its attention to the “real world” and by the parameters having to do with social consumption, deprived of its essential reason by centripetal force, and undersold to the centrifugal force of its impact on the public.

To Be or Not to Be

All this seems to point to the theme of this exhibition, which has to do with the symmetrical and complementary author/viewer relationship: to the presumed

pre-existence of the work, to its essence, but also to the ceremonial and rhetorical attributes that it is due...

When and where, who is – or who could ever be – the author depicted from one painting to another, who seems to so repeatedly belie his apparent integrity? A strange figure seems to come forth – or else hide – already over the course of the 1960s: behind a canvas (*Delfo*, 1965^[001]), or capturing himself in some snapshots (1/25, 1965^[fig. 6], *Diaframma 8*, 1965^[005], 1421965, 1965^[004]), assuming the name and the semblances of other artists (Lotto, Vermeer, Poussin...) or even conforming, turning himself into the appearance and material of either a blank (*Monogramma*, 1965^[002]) or painted (*Hi-fi*, 1965^[fig. 1]) canvas...

The figure soon abandons the world stage to reappear as a character who visibly plays the part of a story and “falls” upon the site of the representation. *La caduta di Icaro*^[fig. 2] in the 1980s marks the beginning of a narrative that includes many episodes aimed at spotting, if not actually touching, the threshold of the image.

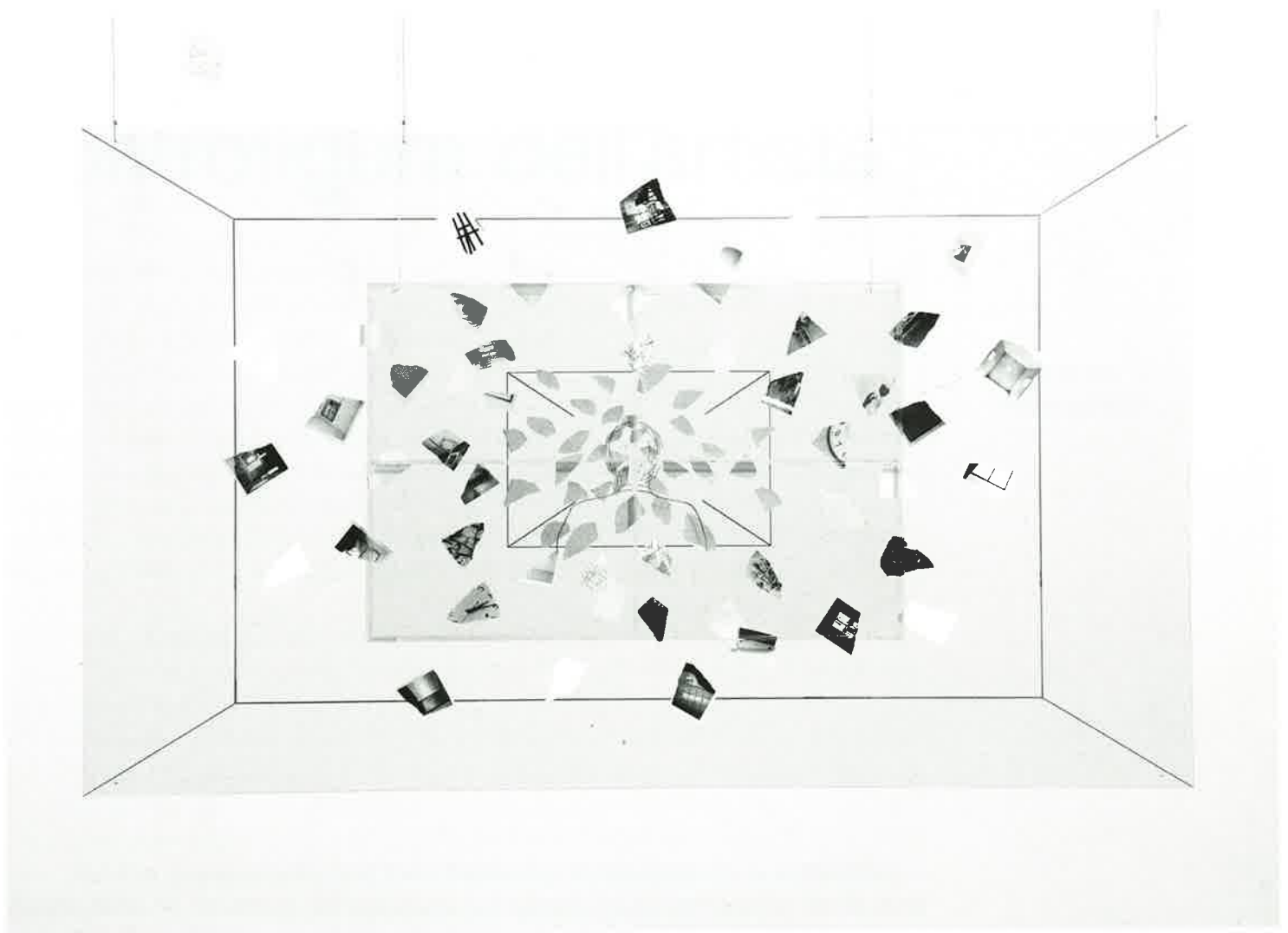
Here are some of the titles of other works of mine on the trail of the figure of the author: *Enfin seuls* (1981)^[009]; *Les fausses confidences* (1983)^[fig. 12]; *Künstler-Theater* (1989)^[fig. 16]; *Essere o non essere* (1994-95)^[016]; *Due personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1996)^[fig. 3]; *Delfo (IV)* (1997)^[017]; *Scena muta (stanza dell'autore)* (1998-99); *Tre per tre (ognuno è l'altro o nessuno)* (1998-99)^[fig. 4]; *Alfa (Un autore senza nome)* (2004)^[013]; *Quadri d'autore* (2006); *Immacolata Concezione. Senza titolo / Senza autore* (2007-08)^[021]. In a certain sense, the exhibition is born and is announced at the end of the path by *L'autore che credeva di esistere (sipario: buio in sala)*, 2013^[023]: a new work consisting of several projections that record the perspectival lines of the space of my studio, which are juxtaposed on those of the exhibition spaces. We thus find ourselves in an “optical room” where the “direction of the visit” occurs in the countless and different transparent juxtapositions that seem to be exhausted in a single instant and be situated in the same place.

A leap in the dark, a lapse of space and time where everything seems to unfold under the sign of artifice and inconsistency... Like at the theatre, when the image joins revolution and discretion in such a synthesis as to seem real. I will thus be the conscious viewer of the existence of a limit, of the relinquishment of investiture and the ensuing failure to enforce the author's role.

In other words, the idea for this exhibition seems to be inspired by a repertoire of allusive pretexts such as tricks and visions, fictions and quotations... *Pleasure of Ruins, Ruines Italiennes, Taste and the Antique, Labyrinthes (du Mythe au Visuel), Italia Antiqua*: volumes lined up on the shelves of my studio, an echo and counterpoint to the declaration of intents that I am now struggling to assign to this new exhibition project, to a subject matter similar to something seen with detachment, as if from outside...

Seeing Is Believing

Each work exists and is absent at the same time, it appears and it reappears: is what we perceive its image or is it the represented image we think we are seeing?



From the original dimensions of my first painting (*Disegno geometrico*, 1960^[fig. 9]), the images expand until they cover the whole area of my visual field (*Dopo tutto*, 2010^[fig. 5]).

Hence, an exhibition that goes from the first four rooms inhabited by works to the threshold of the fifth and last room, where the same “places” just viewed are represented in the “here and now” of the exhibition act.

“Can a work survive, evade the scandal of communication?”

I can’t help but renew, that is, repeat, the nagging question raised almost forty years ago when, comforted by Italo Calvino’s loving approval, I concluded my first collection of writings and working notes (*Idem*, Einaudi, Torino 1975).

The projections, light-filled rooms that end the exhibition, either take us back, or push us forwards, in an optical illusion that seems to be the only possible direction to be taken in the search for a “way out”. •

[fig. 5]
Dopo tutto, 2010