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## *The disappearance of the public. In praise of a reserved life*

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There are two works by Giulio Paolini in Piedmont that I always think of together. On the one hand, there is *Palomar*, 1998, located in Via Po just outside of the artist's studio: it is one of the "Luci d'Artista," the winter lights made by artists that illuminate Turin. Paolini's lights sketch the near-abstract shapes of planets, moons, and spheres in the night. Down the road, which hosts the humanistic faculties of the University of Turin as well as numerous bookstores, where Via Po opens up to become Piazza Vittorio Veneto, the lights draw the figure of an artist, a virtuoso juggler, hovering over luminous moving circles and balancing over the traffic and the urban scene. An expert funambulist, he holds yet more spheres in his open arms.

On the other side of my mental geography there is "*Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*," 2020, the new work by Paolini that is installed far away from the city, in the large gallery with a vaulted brick ceiling on the second floor of the baroque Castello di Rivoli, on the morainic slope at the entrance of the Susa Valley in the Alps. There is a deafening silence in the gallery following the closure of the museum to the public due to the Coronavirus pandemic. What you see, when you are lucky enough to enter the space, is an expanded and three-dimensional version of the artist's first artwork, *Disegno geometrico* (Geometric drawing) of 1960. This initial artwork is simply a white primed tempera canvas of 40 x 60 cm that the artist subdivided by pulling diagonal lines in red ink and orthogonal lines in black ink across the canvas: one of the basic steps a painter takes to prepare his pictorial surface for what is to come. Since 1960, the primed and squared canvas has been suspended out of chronological time, waiting in a metaphysical state of abeyance for the artist to paint an image on its surface.

These two artworks dialog at a distance. They speak to each other, as it were: one—"Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu"—is firmly bound by four walls and demarcated, locked up in the space of a museum; it reflects on the room itself through a geometric, architectural, and cosmic order that remains open to everything that is outside the gallery and that potentially might find its place inside; the other—*Palomar*—with its fragile, porous and labile borders, is unbound and outdoors, on the street, in an urban world of passers-by, bicycles, cars and scooters. It is a microcosm made up of points of light, to which few passers-by pay attention, a misunderstood tight-rope walker suspended high above the unknowing and unreflective life that flows below him.

The name Palomar refers to the novel by Italo Calvino *Mr Palomar*, in which the eponymous character is described in the third person by the narrator as he observes the complex world around him and elaborates philosophical considerations in search of the fundamental truths that underpin it: "in his desire to avoid vague sensations, he establishes for his every action a limited and precise object."<sup>1</sup> In particular, in the third and last section of the novel, Palomar reflects on the cosmos, time, and infinity, looking at things from outside, just like the artist/juggler at the top of the moving light wheels designed by Paolini. Palomar is a detached observer, whose "chief activity will be looking at things from the outside ... But how can you look at something, and set your own ego

aside? Whose eyes are doing the looking? As a rule, you think of the ego as one who is peering out of your own eyes as if leaning on a window sill, looking at the world stretching out before him in all its immensity. So, then: a window looks out on the world. The world is out there; and in here, what do we have? The world still—what else could there be? With a little effort of concentration, Mr Palomar manages to shift the world from in front of him and set it on the sill, looking out. Now, beyond the window, what do we have? The world is also there, and for the occasion has been split into a looking world and a world looked at. And what about him, also known as ‘I,’ namely Mr Palomar? Is he not a piece of world that is looking at another piece of the world? Or else, given that there is world that side of the window and world this side, perhaps the ‘I,’ the ego, is simply the window through which the world looks at the world. To look at itself the world needs the eyes (and the eyeglasses) of Mr Palomar.”<sup>2</sup>

What is a room? What is a thought that thinks through the space in which the thinker is located?

The *Disegno geometrico*, the first act of an artistic journey, still waits today for a masterpiece to manifest itself, and from this sense of expectation comes the title “*Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*” of the new 2020 three-dimensional version. In the time between 1960 and today lies an entire life of an artist, an expanded time-space, suspended in the unmatched gesture of an athlete/magician capable of holding his breath, a balancing tightrope walker who derives inspiration without the need for any exhalation. This is a work of art that holds itself back, and holds us back, from the obligation to collapse in the repetitive and periodic world of daily breathing. The paradox of “*Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*” is that it creates a space of refuge, squared by the mind, but also, in order to accommodate visitors, it has been squared in physical reality through the use of red diagonal and black orthogonal lines made out of adhesive tape on the floor so that the entire room is criss-crossed. The nine points that in the small, original *Disegno geometrico* of 1960 mark in ink the subdivision of the painting’s surface, in this 3D 2020 version are instead marked by the presence of wooden easels, before which a real artist might stand, easels onto which Paolini has placed Plexiglas cases that are mainly empty apart from some torn fragments of copies of drawings and paintings. There were not many visitors to the physical space of “*Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*” in the year 2020: during the pandemic, the museum was closed to the public for long periods of time, and therefore the meaning of the work as a form of eternal expectation of the artist to create his “unknown masterpiece” miraculously coincides with another form of expectation—that of the museum, which awaits the arrival of the visitor: even today, as I write, we are still waiting.

The squaring of the original *Disegno geometrico* creates a central perspectival point according to which the three-dimensional space that will potentially be represented through perspective on the squared canvas is organized. Paolini’s operation, in three-dimensionalizing the small flat painting and expanding it to the size of the large gallery, was to move us into a more open, less ordered condition: that of a potential artwork still to be created in this inhabitable space. Added to the wooden painter’s easel at each of the nine points that mark out the space, there is an additional tenth point in mid-air, signaled by a structure in Plexiglas that is suspended centrally from the ceiling, further transforming the work’s three-dimensionally through its height. The easels indicate the position and point of view of the painter, the point from which the artist observes the world; and so, in this three-dimensional version of the *Disegno geometrico*, there is no longer a Renaissance focal point but complex and multiple points of view. The visitor experiences the feeling of being inside the *Disegno geometrico*, inside a project, inside thought, the place of artistic intention. The experience is that of being in a room, a space of absolute lock-down, a space of essences; but actually it is a room transformed into language, into thought, and therefore into a conscious space, in which it is possible to reflect on oneself, on the concept of what it means to be enclosed and locked-down—a place in which it’s possible to build one’s own solitary space of freedom, a “room

of one's own." Even though it is a cell, a world on another level is created, one in which thought can always build the release from a codified grammar and create another one. This is the freedom to exist beyond "bare life," beyond simply biological life. In this Paolinian world of "*Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*," there is no bodily dimension that is separate from thought and vice versa. As Baruch Spinoza wrote in his *Ethics: Demonstrated in Geometric Order* (1661–65), of which this installation/demonstration by Paolini makes me think, there can be no thought without body-feeling and reference to the body and vice-versa: "No attribute of substance can be conceived from which it would follow that substance can be divided,"<sup>3</sup> and, "Whatsoever comes to pass in the object of the idea, which constitutes the human mind, must be perceived by the human mind, or there will necessarily be an idea in the human mind of the said occurrence. That is, if the object of the idea constituting the human mind be a body, nothing can take place in that body without being perceived by the mind."<sup>4</sup> The "theater" of the exhibition reminds us that substance and attribute are indivisible and that the subject is constituted at the time of feeling or thinking, which are the same thing.

"*Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*" is the work of an elderly man, but one who responds to the moment in which we are living, and does so with the tools that formed him in the 1960s, that is, at the prime time of his origin as an artist. His roots lie at the beginning of the "society of spectacle," after World War II, which saw the emergence of a form of thinking and practice capable of focusing on the phenomenological awareness of being *hic et nunc* (here and now) in a place, of what it means to be a thinking-body. This was described by the heir of Spinoza, Maurice Merleau-Ponty in 1945, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, which was translated for the first time into Italian in 1965: "True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest."<sup>5</sup>

The artists of Arte Povera—and in this Paolini excels—have always wanted to enhance and render perceivable to viewers the real space in which they find themselves, their beingness there, their uniqueness, and consequently their authentic presentness in a place and in a precise time—phenomenologically in the here and now. For this reason, amongst the first and most important Arte Povera works by Paolini is *Lo Spazio* (Space), 1967, created at Galleria La Bertesca in Genoa in the first exhibition that the art critic Germano Celant curated to identify the birth of the movement (*Arte Povera Im spazio*), which collected works by artists subsequently identified with Arte Povera and by those already connected to environmental art. In this "space" in which visitors found themselves, Paolini did nothing but equidistantly position eight small white wooden letters of the alphabet, each 10 cm tall, along the four walls of a room: together, they formed the words "lo spazio"—basically describing the space of the exhibition itself.

For Paolini, the artwork consists of the subtraction of its traditional meaning, rejecting the elite idea that art is an original creation of a genius and his self-expression (as Kant defined it). Paolini chose at that very moment that he would exhibit only the disappearance of the work of art itself and evoke a sense, not without melancholy, of the conclusion of the great story of modern art. It is as if the task or role of the artist could no longer be anything but the staging of this fundamental absence, loss, or lack, in a form of meta-art, or post-art, which is told in a time that remains and that repeats all previous time. That previous time was innocent and consisted in an age when art could be done directly, without meta-thoughts and without the consequences of the awareness of existing in the era of the mass experience of photographically reproduced art.

Walter Benjamin wrote his well-known essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, between 1935 and 1939, just before he died in 1940, and the last version of 1939 was published only posthumously, in 1955. It was translated into Italian in Turin for Einaudi publishers

in 1966, when Paolini was a young artist and Arte Povera was coagulating: the first exhibitions would be in 1967. Benjamin had a strong impact both on literature and on art, even though at times indirectly. It is not important to know whether or not Paolini read Benjamin, because in the 1960s even the sun and the air were “Benjaminian.” For Benjamin, the advent of photography and film invalidated the concept of the authenticity of the artwork, and consequently its “aura.” The generation of artists to which Paolini belongs took note of this transformation but did not share Benjamin’s idea that it was the dawn of a new era that would be characterized by an art of the masses and for the masses, and that therefore art was dead. The most sensitive and radical artists, both in Italy with Arte Povera and internationally through the various movements such as Post-Minimalism and Conceptualism, instead rethought the concept of authenticity, so that it was no longer considered a quality of the artwork (now unauthentic) but a quality of the viewer’s experience of the artwork. In these terms, the viewers of a Paolini exhibition could have an authentic experience of their own presence in the exhibition through the phenomenological understanding that occurs through the body and mind, as well as an intellectual relationship to the remains, fragments, copies, and photographic traces of the great art of the past.

Little by little, however, from the 1990s to today, things have changed due to the internet-based technological revolution: consciousness has entered into our screens. During the year 2020, because of the global pandemic, this ongoing process has accelerated significantly: our lock-down lives in our homes have turned us into the virtual audience of increasing digital communications, and we have been called to actively participate in exchanges on online platforms, to the degree that messaging has become almost a social duty. Otherwise, we are considered obsolete, quasi-autistic, anti-social and useless subjects in the nascent virtual economy. The aspect of “*Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*,” created by Paolini during this terrible year and a half, that surprises me most is the arrangement of the easels on the floor that correspond to the squaring of the canvas, made three-dimensional in the large space of the gallery: it is an exhibition of the “exhibition” itself, but the “exhibition” to which it alludes is mostly a blank space, demarcated by easels and empty Plexiglas cases (except for some pieces of torn paper, remains of photographs of artworks), and without viewers, public, audience. It is a moving empty space.

At this moment, in the years 2020 and 2021, it would seem that we are in a new time of profound passage and transition—a moment similar to that when the unique and authentic modern work of art disappeared in the last century, as Benjamin had intuited. At our moment of passage today, the public has been evacuated: it has been mined and is gone, absent, banned, left at home. The museum is empty, just as theaters are empty. When we return to live in it as audience after the pandemic, it will not be like at the end of the Spanish flu in the early twentieth century, when society perfected the exhibition model as a collective modern rite. Instead, we will be in a post-museum era, a post-public era, where human beings *re-perform* the roles of public and audience; we will be already-disappeared-humans, already subjected to a fully digital life, and thus intentionally re-performing the role of human members of the audience. We will no longer be innocent.

The presence in this exhibition of the artwork titled *Senza più titolo* (No longer titled), 2010, supports this interpretation. Measuring 1.65 x 2.20 x 2.20 meters, it is a model of an exhibition space, guarded by miniature statues of Carabinieri and surrounded by columns in white plaster, in the middle of which lie fragments of photographic reproductions of works of art. It is the Temple of Art, that is, the “Museum,” the place where the “exhibition” is installed. As in “*Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*,” without the public but inhabited by easels, this artwork speaks about a world in which not only have the artwork and the artist disappeared, but also the public; only the guards remain.

The events of 2020 that continue into 2021 have turned cities into deserts, making vivid the disappearance of the humans. Periodically, everything is forced to become still and uninhabited as

humanity is confronted with the silence of death. It is a terrible but also creative and poetic confrontation. Despite its tragic nature, this silence and this absence of the human seems more dignified than the hysterical racket of digital superficialities.

The sense of living in End Times, in final times, at the conclusion of a great civilization, is everywhere. This makes the work of Paolini particularly visionary today, since it has always been based on the feeling of belonging to a time after time, a time that remains, in front of the rubble of the works of the past and on the threshold of an artwork that never comes, at the beginning of a new century that lives with a sense of permanent ending, which it tries to resist through science and technology, both paradoxically bound up in the end itself.

Our humanity remains in our conscious use of language, in our words spoken with intention. This is the sphere of poetry, which remains alive even in the era of predictive algorithms and applied statistics. For this reason, Paolini wanted to have not a single catalog for this exhibition, but a box containing two volumes—one about the exhibition and the other a collection of his poems. The title *Recital* alludes to a performance or, perhaps, a poetry reading. Here, Paolini writes, “I do not know, I cannot say / what I have wanted to do. / Those who know, refuse to understand / that one can also stay silent.”

The fundamental question that he seems to pose today is how we can continue to have experiences of places and spaces even though we have already been transformed into digital avatars, ghosts of ourselves, in an eternal Lacanian mirror stage from whose dizzying vortex we cannot escape, except to make small movements and short journeys. Perhaps, a walk to an exhibition. Despite everything, he suggests, our existence *can* be reserved.

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<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1985), p. 3. Original ed. in Italian, Turin: Einaudi, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 113–14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ethics* 1, Prop. 12, [http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary\\_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/elc.htm#:~:text=No%20attribute%20of%20substance%20can,substance%2C%20or%20they%20will%20not](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/elc.htm#:~:text=No%20attribute%20of%20substance%20can,substance%2C%20or%20they%20will%20not) (accessed March 14, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *Ethics* 2, Prop. 12, [http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary\\_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/e2b.htm](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/e2b.htm) (accessed March 14, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 452. First English ed. 1962. Original ed. in French, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 515.