

image of the image

Germano Celant discusses the work of Giulio Paolini

If art has a real existence, which can be apprehended through the channels of phenomenology and semiology, through philosophy and aesthetics, then it is a dynamic and concrete being, continually evolving along certain lines of thought and action. It is something which is defined objectively. It is an object or apparatus, whose existence can be verified, both **a priori** and **a posteriori**, by examining its basic processes. This type of verification began in the sixties when, instead of the individual work or "artefact" being examined, all artefacts were considered together: in other words, art as a self-signifying whole. This use of the artistic whole rather than of a selected work of art, for the purposes of giving meaning to the "art context" involved a process in which research was directed inward. In the opacity and impersonality of its own processes, art could reflect upon the linguistic features and proportions of

its communication structures. It tried to discover what image it had given itself and to see itself as a system composed of acts without an author, constructions without a constructor. Before allowing a new artefact to enter its ambit, all preceding artefacts and all existing processes had to be seen as given facts, whose material and theoretical characteristics were to be determined.

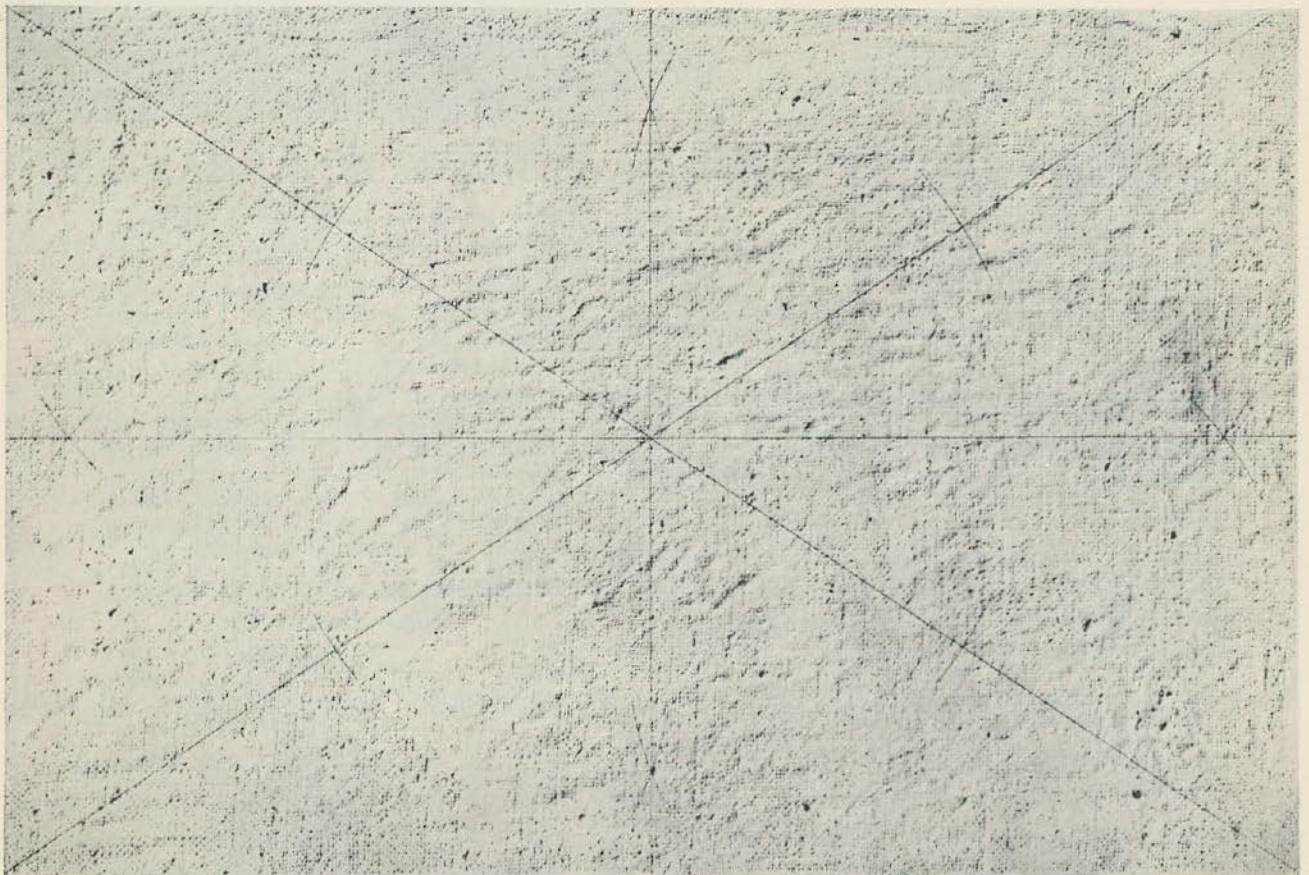
However, unlike Duchamp's operation, in this the artefact was not transferred into an alien territory, but it was reflected as though with a mirror, on to the territory of all artefacts. Likewise, the art context was not invaded by extraneous objects. Art was turned in on itself, so that unnoticed and anonymous entities were brought to light. There were accepted just as they appeared, with their visible uses, before it was asked whether these uses entailed any expression of definite intention.

Art does not aim at producing new

linguistic complexes; rather it revolves round its own meaning. It comes into being and sees itself as an autonomous entity and as a prefabricated instrument. It does not strain to refute itself, but is aware of "being here" through self-analysis and self-objectification.

A search for self-knowledge, prompted by the idea that art is a product of its own product. This search widens out to become a pragmatic and philosophical system of deciphering the particular and general characteristics of art. This does not mean that the procedures of art are to be put to a different use, which is decided upon once and for all. They are examined, and placed in their context, in order to discover the "circumstances" in which they become effective; and initially they are not given any further layer of meaning.

Giulio Paolini *Disegno Geometrico* 1960

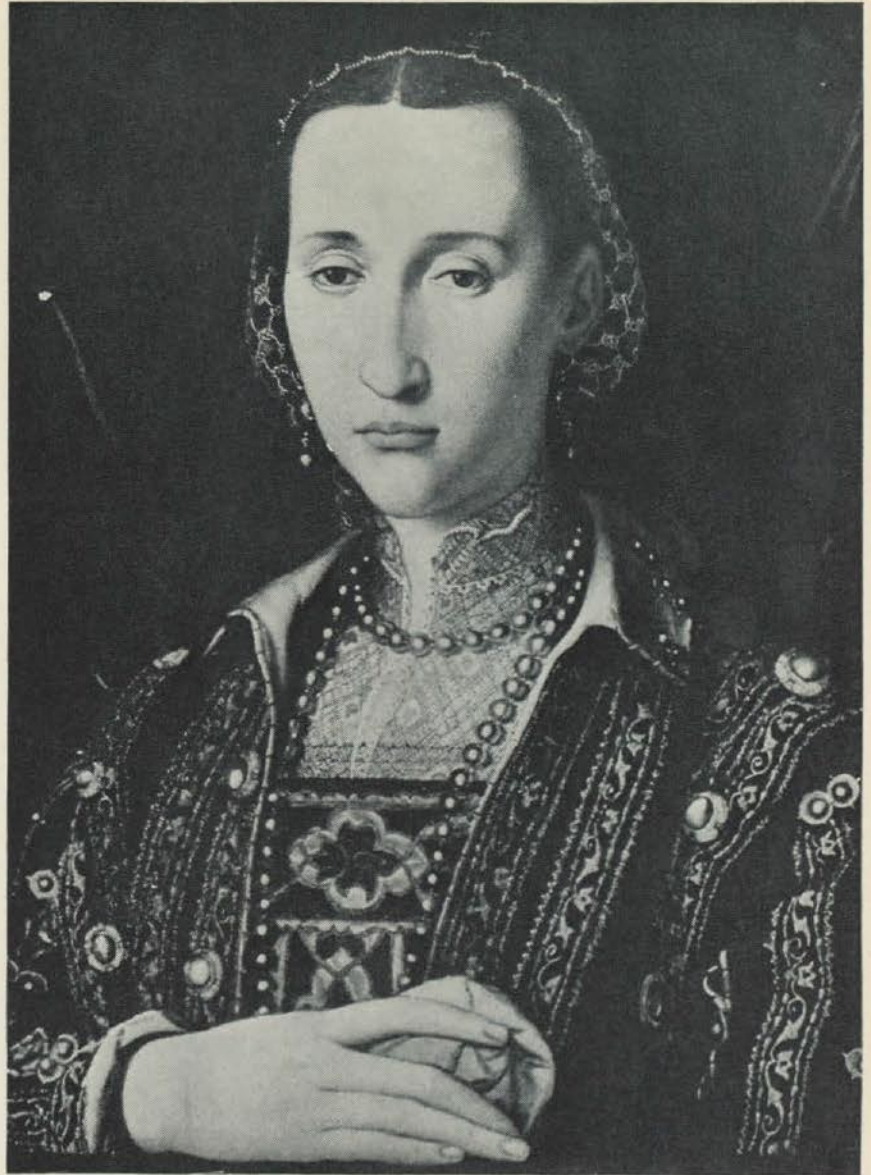


Giulio Paolini has adopted as his main theme the "textual" theory of art and the cognitive investigation of its techniques and materials. Since 1960 he has been mainly concerned with bringing to the forefront the "concrete" sources of art. His efforts are directed towards deciphering *sema* such as canvas, surface, historical artefact, author, techniques, public, space and environment. These are regarded as standard signs, differentiated according to use or purpose, but which in themselves, as potential entities, have a meaning in so far as they are lingual structures. These structures, "taken out of the context of their relationships and out of their time, are then seen for the first time as being laden with interrogatives."² The attention paid to them reveals the artist's plan to carry out an artistic evaluation of anything connected with art as a primary source, viewing it as a structural element. His research since 1960 has therefore been "directed towards an absolute image inherent in the actual nature of the canvas, and in the use of an elementary technique."³ This process begins with *Disegno Geometrico* (Geometrical Drawing) in which Paolini invests with meaning the commonplace process of spatial definition: drawing a square on the surface.⁴

This work immediately delineates the scope of Paolini's research. By means of a thought process using "real" and "conventional" terms, he proposes to analyse the positive and concrete language of art. His analysis probes deeper during the next few years, when Paolini contemplates not only the possible limits of art but also the instruments connected with it, such as the canvas, drawn line and colour. He focuses his attention on the latter in particular, and dedicates several works to it. Firstly as "category" it is represented by its container, then as *chroma*, its existence is demonstrated by little cubes of different colours. Finally, as a range of possible chromatic choices it is documented by means of a commercial shade card.

Paolini's intention is to define the neutral object. He refuses to present it with any theory or opinion. What he aims to do is to "describe" it objectively. Therefore he displays it "in suspension" in a vacuum, as it will normally be encountered, without any linguistic contamination.

At the same time as the colour, he incidentally brings in other, undifferentiated entities: surface, canvas, wooden supports and graphic structures. Having dealt with these he then conducts a survey on the use of these materials, on the part of artist or spectator. This entails further rethinking of existing



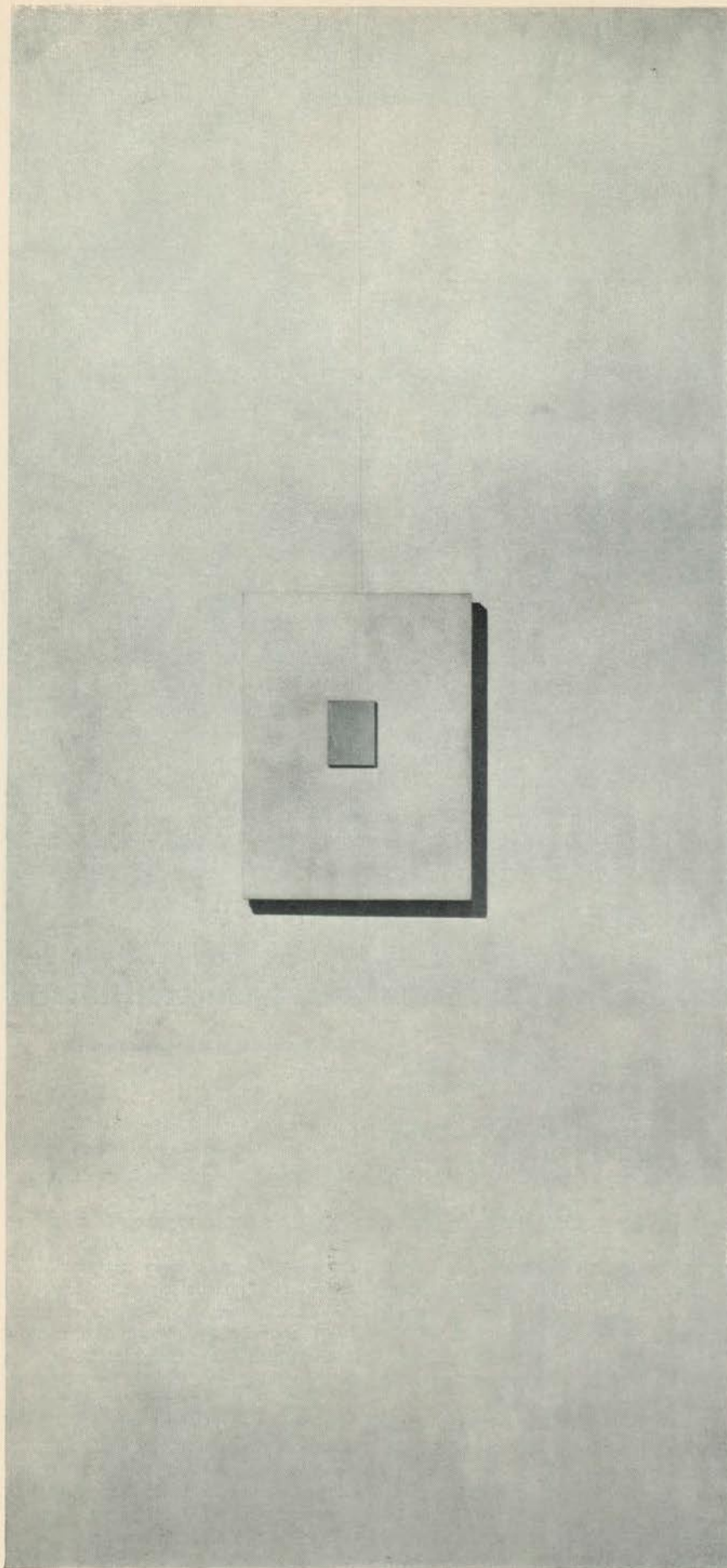
Giulio Paolini E 1963 (Bronzino's *Eleonora di Toledo*)

artistic language. The latter is "described" according to the methodology already established. "In the same manner in which I chose coloured paper and squared paper, I have now chosen reproductions of works of art."⁵ In *E* (And), a reproduction of a portrait by Bronzino, *Eleonora di Toledo*, is placed on an easel, which appears as the support. It is a descriptive statement. Paolini explicitly establishes the presence of a "relationship of use" between sign (the historical picture) and vehicle (the easel-support). In doing this, he presents another component of art: the totality of preceding artefacts.

But if the historical artefact is an "object" which can be displayed, the nature of iconography is occasional. Its purpose is to justify, in terms of time, the existence of the picture as a thought-process. It is in fact the neutral document which demonstrates the concrete idea

of artistic "discourse", and the title *E* is a statement stemming from the actual self-significance of the picture.

Paolini's cognitive process does not miss out any concrete implication of art. During the same period, he goes on to consider as constituent parts of the art context, the visitor, space and environment introducing hypothetical exhibitions in which the public is "on show" and becomes the object of investigation and exhibition. It is easy to understand how the discovery of this ubiquitous nature of the art context led Paolini to notice not only related entities, including several objects, but also the "support's support": the wall bearing the work of art. In 1964 Paolini exhibited a series of plywood panels. These were elements



which recalled the physical entity occupied by the picture, and they were leant against or hung on the walls. The use of neutral surfaces serves to distinguish not values, but the relationship involved when one surface is placed on another. The idea of space-occupation is centred on the identity of the two surfaces, picture and wall, and on the significance of one surface on another. This finally becomes a self-illustrating instrument in **Duepiudue** (Two plus two). "The photograph on the largest panel is the image of how the picture appeared in front of the lens. In other words, it reproduces the image itself that one has of the picture."⁶ This work displays the definition of support and of the image of the support, by means of the photograph, thus containing within itself its image as perceived from outside. An awareness of the physical and visual presence of the support also involves the historical existence of the artist, whose products are part of a history of art, as he himself is.

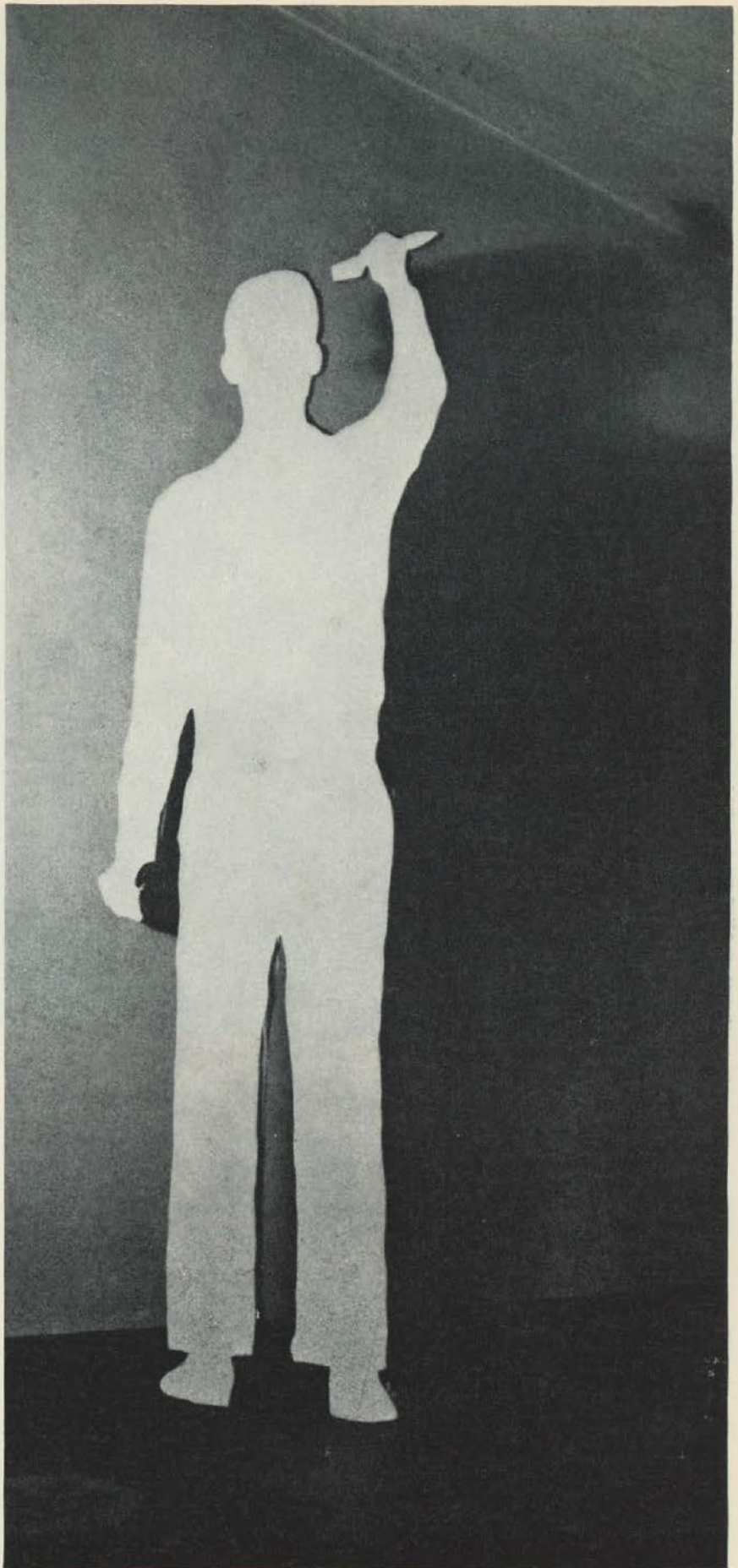
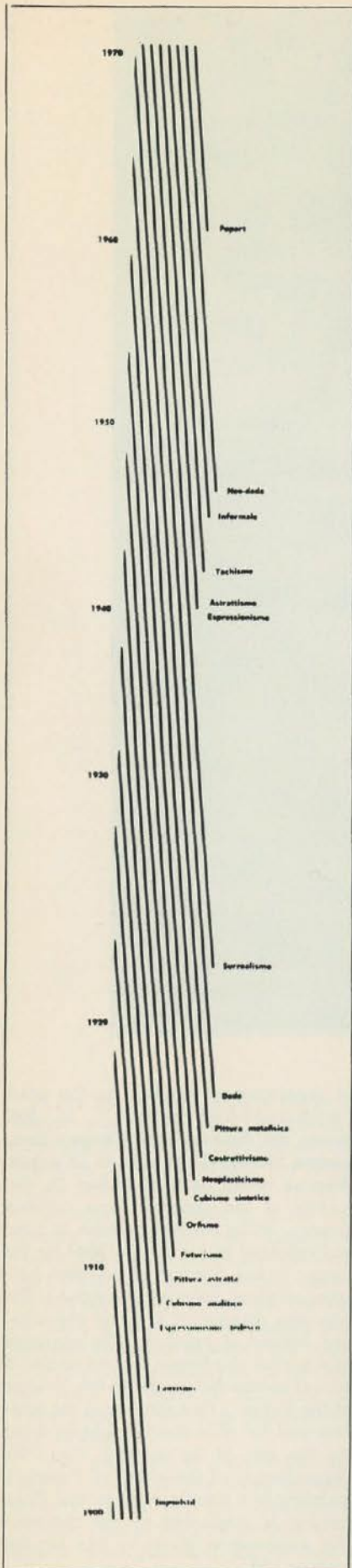
174 is a wood panel on which is stuck a photograph of page 174 of an art book. The photograph reproduces a chart showing artistic movements from 1900 to 1965, the year in which this work was done.

The aim of the work is "to place the picture in its correct position in the chart with which it coincides; the picture is thus the physical end-point of the chart which it reproduces."⁷ With **174**, an awareness of the time-factor becomes evident in the analysis of the workings of the art context's components. This can be linked historically with the image of the artist, whose "figure" is captured in **Monogramma**. This work concerns the relationship situation between arteficer and artefact. The white-painted canvas is bent so as to assume the form of the artist at work. The need to drive historical implications right into the centre of his research, the need felt by the artist and all the factors which have contributed to the realisation of the work of art, have led Paolini to extend the scope of his analysis still further. It now embraces not only the basic data, but also the "situation data" These are "described" through a medium which allows maximum objectivisation: photography. Photography makes it possible to extend the analysis to include all data previously displayed, reconstructing the genesis of each item. This use of photography, from 1965 onwards, as a reflection of the overall art context, renders

left: Giulio Paolini **Duepiudue** 1965

nearright: Giulio Paolini **174** 1965

farr ght: Giulio Paolini **Monogramma** 1965





the material nature of the analytical process less important. The research moves on to a strictly conceptual plane on which the object is "made abstract". However, although the use of photography overcomes the need for objectivity, there is still the same analytical value as in the previous works. The document now appears as photographic canvas. "Photography enables me to expand the language I use until it includes an investigation of the artist's gestures and his appearance".⁸ From *Delfo* and *Diagramma 8*, of 1965, up to *D867*, of 1967, the artist appears as a vehicle for himself. Research on a time basis does not proceed mechanically according to a pre-established continuity, from present to past or from past to present. The time circle allows for interruptions and pauses which concern not only the specific art context, but

also the context of the artist, with his historical and linguistic preferences. So from 1968 onwards, Paolini invokes in his work "the etymological transparency of the works of Beato Angelico, Johannes Vermeer, Nicolas Poussin, Lorenzo Lotto, Jacques Louis David."⁹

After looking at art as an instrumental entity, Paolini turns his attention to its historical and communicational evolution. His vision passes right through the attributes of art and focuses on historical documents. The historical term had already appeared in *E*. There, however, it was used in the sense of demonstrating a further attribute of the vehicle: the typographical image was stuck on to wood and then fixed on a frame. Now, the historical term is adopted as an integral part of the analysis, so that the use of the photographic canvas reappears, but this time adapted to a process

of consciousness applied to the triad "artefact-arteficer-spectator". In *Nel mezzo del dipinto Flora sparge i fiori, mentre Narciso si specchia in un'anfora d'acqua tenuta dalla ninfa Eco* (In the middle of the painting Flora scatters flowers, while Narcissus looks at himself reflected in a water jar held by the nymph Echo), the correspondence between arteficer and spectator is due to the concrete manner of focusing the artefact. Instead of equalising the elements of the triad, the lens is moved so that it superimposes the image on the "image of the image"; thus the eye of the arteficer and that of the spectator are replaced by the eye of the artefact. For "the reproduction of the detail of Poussin's painting is a double one, so that Flora herself is displaying to the spectator the appearance given to her by the painter."¹⁰



At the end of 1968, after a series of works concerned with deciphering historical artefacts, Paolini reversed the operation. He made himself the factual object of his own research, as artist and spectator. He closed in on his own identity in order to "see" himself as object and subject at one and the same time. As a result of this turning inward came works like *Io (I)* and *Cio che non ha limiti e che per sua natura non ammette limitazioni di sorta* (That which is limitless and which by its nature does not allow any kind of limitation), or *Vedo (I see)*, in which he deciphers his field of vision.

Vedo, exhibited at Documenta, consists of a series of dots drawn in pencil directly on the wall, corresponding to Paolini's field of vision. It documents the artist's finite condition and is thus a demonstration of another of art's limits:

a finite state which from 1971 onwards is "repainted" or "rewritten", in the collection of signatures and dates from previous works, from 1960 to 1971.

Finally in 1972, Paolini's linguistic research is directed towards the object and the subject of the investigation already carried out. "Until now it was the language in itself which drew inferences from the image. Now it is the image which aims at illustrating the enigma of language."¹¹ This is why his pictures, from 1972 onwards, have become a diaphragm between his work and the manner of seeing it. A further look at his latest work shows it to be the rational proliferation of his previous work. His pictures of 1972 are in fact an extension of *Disegno Geometrico* of 1960. They arise from the basic co-ordinates of that first work. They have kept the original quality and they point

above: Giulio Paolini *Nel mezzo del dipinto Fiora sparge i fiori ... 1968*

left: Giulio Paolini *D867 1967*

to the investigation which has been carried out, but which can be extended and referred to again.

¹ From the Latin *arte factum*, 'made by art'.

² M. Volpi, *Fabro, Paolini, Kounellis* in the catalogue *Qui Arte Contemporanea*, Rome, April 1968.

³ G. Paolini, *Note di Lavoro 1971*, unpublished.

⁴ G. Paolini, *Interview with Germano Celant 1972*, unpublished.

⁵ G. Paolini, *op. cit.*

⁶ G. Paolini, *op. cit.*

⁷ G. Paolini, *op. cit.*

⁸ G. Paolini, *op. cit.*

⁹ G. Paolini, *una lettera sul tempo* in the catalogue of the Notizie Gallery, Turin 1968.

¹⁰ G. Paolini, *Note di Lavoro 1972*, unpublished.

¹¹ G. Paolini, *Interview with G. Celant, 1972*, unpublished.