

Words Megan Wilson-De La Mare
Photography Paolo Prendin

THE BITTER TRUTH FIXER IN THE POST TRUTH ERA



THE BITTER TRUTH FIXER IN THE POST TRUTH ERA IS PAOLO PRENDIN'S EXPLORATION IN TO POST TRUTH, CONTRADICTIONS OF THE MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION, FOCUSED THROUGH THE LONG TERM PROJECT OF GIULIANO, WHO HAS BEEN RECORDING ITALIAN TELEVISION BROADCASTS FOR OVER 30 YEARS. I SPOKE WITH PAOLO ABOUT HIS TIME AND RELATIONSHIP WITH GIULIANO AND THE AFFECTS OF MEDIA ON PUBLIC BELIEF.

How did you come across Giuliano and his work, and what initially interested you to start photographing him?

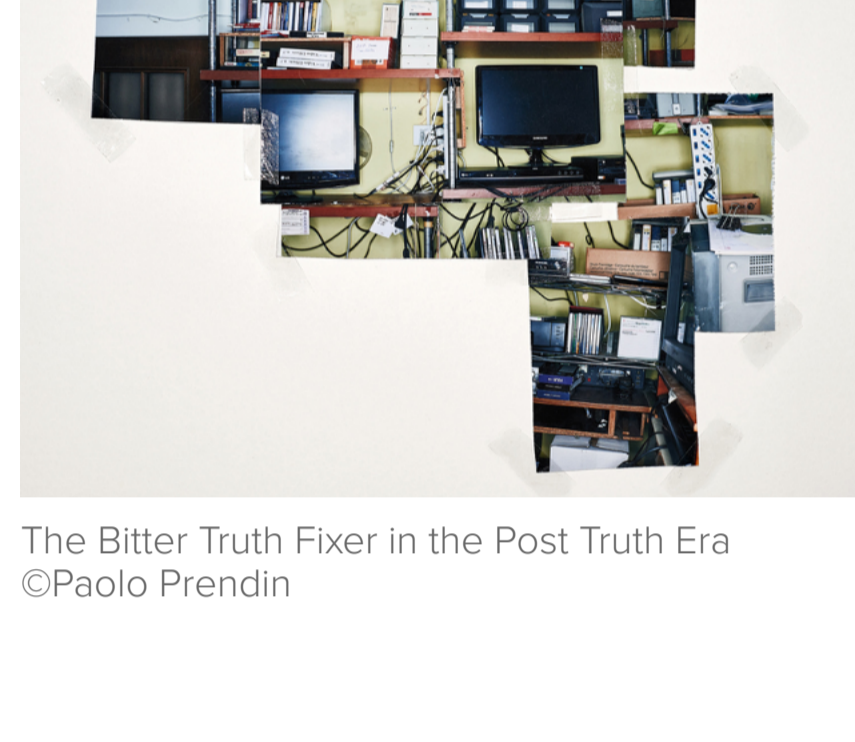
When I met Giuliano, in 2016 I was working as a lighting assistant for a photographer and friend Emanuele Salvagno whose job was to portray the faces and private environments of a popular and historic neighbourhood Porta Portello in Padua (a city that has many universities in the north-east of Italy). The assignment was to tell the story of those still living and working in the neighbourhood, an area undergoing gentrification. Giuliano was one of the few participants with a creative background. He comes from a family of bookbinders and his laboratory is one of the most historical in the city of Padua. After photographing him at his work, he told us about his personal interests; making up and telling dark humour jokes, acting in theatre and above all an unconditional love for human history. Then he showed us a personal photograph of him sitting in a room full of screens, VCRs and wires. You know the stereotypical way hackers are represented in movies and series? Well, at first glance it was like seeing the classic room where a hacker could easily live. Through recordings and catalogs of television news he wants to 'adjust' the course of truth in human history, reversing the idea that classic media influence has only one direction from top to bottom. Like a hacker, it's not as strange as I first thought, he's dedicated and serious about his recordings. It's not a Sunday hobby but a personal-life mission. There wasn't a particular cause that gave rise in him an interest in breaking news, but rather a set of interests; he is an amateur actor and writer of theatre, the relationship with video is born with the will to document the unfolding of his performances as an actor. The sensitivity to issues concerning the exploited and oppressed was born when he was young, being very close to the political movements of workers' struggle. His idea is that only through an active and critical use of information, one can grasp the nuances, the rhetoric, the narrative construction, but above all the contradictions and lies in our culture. The public and the private television in Italy had, and for some aspects have, the ability to influence the behaviour and political choices of the population (see the documentary *Videoocracy*), before the rise of social media. The concept of post-truth began to be discussed across the public opinion.

Your relationship with Giuliano is very intriguing and unique, you share an interesting dynamic between two recorders. Can you describe a bit about your experience of working with and photographing Giuliano in this way?

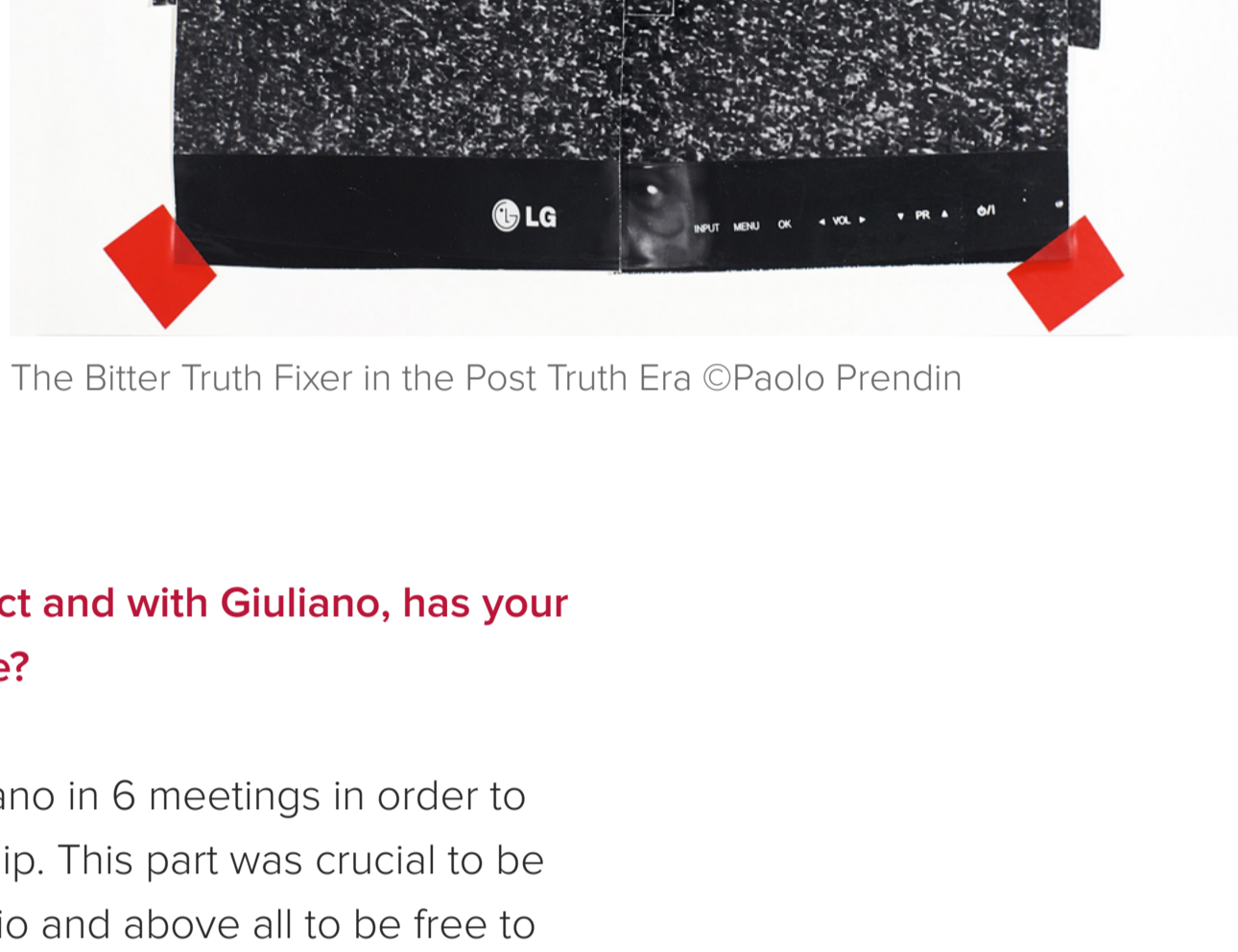
It took me a long time to get to photograph Giuliano because he didn't want to be perceived as an old man and hoarder who had a problem with order. I tried through visits, discussions (and various coffees and spritz) to convince him that my interest was genuine and far from prejudice. I wondered, how can I visually narrate the activity and environment of an archivist? But not a librarian archivist or a museum archivist, but a television information archivist. How I could effectively narrate his practice that influenced his environment and his behaviour so massively? Despite his good faith, Giuliano doesn't use a journalistic or scientific method in his reviews, he uses only his experience, so how can I tell the contradiction of this aspect? With the video recording he would archive and review the pieces of a chaotic world, a world that he's already perceiving through his own narrative. So it made no sense for me to photograph this person in a single image, I had to represent the physical activity of immersing himself in the world of information. So, in a way, I had to do the same thing that Giuliano did. I arrived at my own personal interpretation of his story through pieces of deconstructed reality with the use of a surgical flash, the voluntary and involuntary alteration of the point of view and the post manipulation and collages of the images, implicitly suggesting the idea that we never could arrive at a holistic and truthful vision of a fact or news. This visual approach becomes almost a meta-reference, not only to Giuliano's work and the media in general, but to the very inability of the photographic medium to deal with the concept of truth and reality. A classical Rashomon effect, despite original intentions we come to contradict the idea of truth.



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How much time did you spend on the project and with Giuliano, has your relationship and the project continued since?

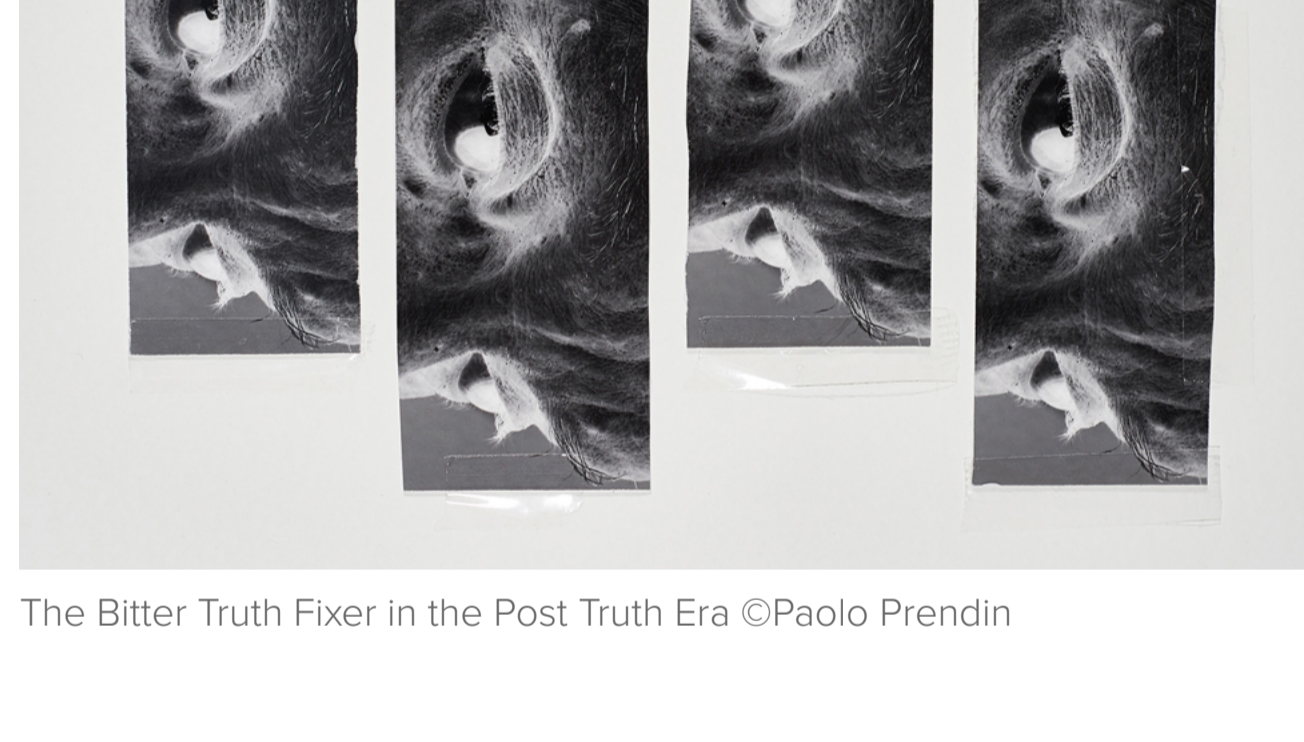
In the pre-production phases I met Giuliano in 6 meetings in order to create a relationship of trust and friendship. This part was crucial to be able to enter into the intimacy of his studio and above all to be free to move around without having to account for what I wanted to photograph. When I had access to his home and his studio I was there for about a day. When Giuliano starts his activity he moves between two rooms, the official studio where there are several screens and video recording instruments and the living room, where he tries to combine his activity by watching television with his wife. He is certainly an incredibly active old man with a very lively intellect and when he starts recording he enters a sort of torpor, a mystical trance where he tries to listen meticulously to everything that is said, whether it is a news program that reports the breaking stories of the day or a scientific report program. Then considering the editing and collage phase, made of attempts, trials, pauses and errors, I have dedicated about 9 months to the whole project. Since then, however, due to many of my travels, I have not had the opportunity to meet Giuliano again. I would like to do so as soon as possible, mostly to be able to present and hear what he thinks of my work on him.

In Giuliano's idea and search for 'the contradictions and lies in our culture', were you aware of a main point of focus and interest in his belief of contradictions, or were his findings very varied?

One of the main points of focus is the news concerning trade union movements and the fight for Italian workers' rights. The precarious work conditions of Amazon Italy is an example: the arrival of Amazon in Italy was welcomed with joy because of the fact that a company of this kind would bring work to the Italians. Giuliano hypothesised cases of exploitation and precariousness in the storage centre, before these cases came to public attention. And again following the main political television talk shows, Giuliano recorded, wrote and analysed the persuasive rhetoric of the various political talks on various topical issues to grasp the contradictions or falsehoods, without distinction of political orientation (it's difficult to point out specific cases because Italian politicians fill their mouths and lie continuously, especially in debate programs such as these). The only programs he considers respected are those of scientific reportage such as Quark and TGR Leonardo. For sure, however, his range of topics are as wide as television itself.



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It's interesting that you mention your interpretation of Giuliano's work through the manipulation of the images as a visual representation of the inability to photographically present the concept of truth and reality. When I first saw the project and the collages of the images to me it felt reflective of an obsession.

Did you always see this as a photographic project or did you consider other mediums in the process?

I am aware that it could be a suitable story for video, especially as a hypothetical video interview, that could show the breadth of his thinking and habits of working. But I have always considered this project as a photographic work, at a certain point more than 'documenting' this man's practice, the relationship between Giuliano and me became interesting and a priority. The observer eventually becomes the subject of observation itself. If I had to consider another practice I would surely be inspired by *Blorb*: in Italy, there is a fantastic television program called *Blorb*. In practice, the authors of the show edit audio and video clips taken from the television programs of that day, and every evening at 8pm show the results. A sort of Dadaist percussion of YouTube Poop with an often ironic and humorous result.

You mention in your project statement the phrase 'Who doesn't know the history, is condemned to repeat it' which you observed Giuliano frequently repeating while recording. Has the experience and witnessing Giuliano's work changed how you view the media?

Before I met Giuliano, I was experiencing a period of strong political instability that to some extent reflected the climate of strong uncertainty in Italy. It was the period when people started talking about fake news, collective anger, populism and how certain parties were able to leverage these collective perceptions. I lived and continue to live in a strong sense of distrust of the media. Certainly after meeting Giuliano I tried to benefit even more from the doubt and value the knowledge and awareness that this can bring. Giuliano certainly taught me that understanding information is a slow process. A process that comes with uncertainties and contradictions.



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After 30 years of recording, Giuliano's archive of recordings must be very substantial. Does he have an end goal for his findings and materials, or is it purely a personal search and obsession?

Let's say that some recordings, at least those that have required less recent media such as videotapes, have created some space problems, in fact many materials have been either archived at his daughter's home or recovered in more recent media such as CD-ROMs or hard drives. Giuliano has tried several times to collaborate with institutions, especially with the University of Padua, to legitimise his practice. But there have never been moments of openness. These episodes only contributed to promote his solo practice without a specific need for a collective accessibility.

With social media and awareness around fake news stories, through projects like Giuliano's, do you see a current change in the public's belief of the media and its power and influence over society in Italy?

To answer your question, I'll use the recent pandemic as an example. The major newspapers, breaking news sites and private and public television have perpetuated in Italy a system based on sensationalist tension, generating collective anxiety that cannot be directly controlled, this obviously to monopolise the attention of public opinion in an incorrect and invasive way; generating chaos in the cities and an almost total lack of lucid and correct information. Luca Sofri, one of the few journalists who's tried to talk about this issue in a rational way, wrote that what we have lived through in Italy is an authentic Post-Truth situation:

"Those who want a clear and complete word won't find it, because there isn't one. It is a de facto post-truth, or a pre-truth, if you like: a situation in which we don't know things yet, nobody knows them, and we are not used to them, in 2020. A new risk could enter our lives that we do not know, but we must do what we know is useful, and in the meantime live the rest of our lives with reasonable caution but without delirium. But it's not easy, and for now we are in the most classic of situations where the real damage is made from the fear." (Translated from the article 'We Are Not Prepared' published in *Il Post*).

And then, having seen and understood the terrible effects that this disease has left, from the economy to the loss of life, it seems at times that nothing has actually happened. Awareness, which is now widely lacking, is the only way to implement a process of change. It will be the incredible historical moment we are experiencing that will determine whether we will be able to seize the latent opportunities or not.

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