

Michelangelo Pistoletto: A Theater for Everyone

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The remarkable art of Michelangelo Pistoletto encompasses many media: painting, sculpture, and performance are chief among his means of expression. Very much a child of the of the 1960s, Pistoletto started with an art that actively includes his audience; his mirror paintings, begun in 1962 and made with a tissue-paper image fixed onto a polished, stainless steel surface, reflect the viewers who make their way into the reflecting surface to look at the image. The inclusion of Pistoletto's audience generates a theater that changes according to the patterns of activity taking place within the painting's reflective field. Pistoletto, whose accomplishments include the creation of Lo Zoo, a contemporary commedia dell'arte group that created street theater for public audience in the late 1960s, sees his work as an open invitation to act in order to become and to be—ways of existence that emphasize public action of an undirected sort. Basically an improvisatory artist whose efforts reflect, literally and figuratively, the actions of himself and others, Pistoletto has created an art that maintains a dialogue implying a radical communication—albeit a conversation that does not *directly* entertain a leftist view of art.

Indeed, unlike the late Marxist sculptor Mario Merz, who along with Pistoletto is one of the best-known Arte Povera (Poor Art) practitioners, Pistoletto has seen fit to produce a stance more politically invisible in nature. His art often depends on a staged performance, in which chances are taken to enhance a fluid spectrum of activities. These actions do not challenge the status quo so much as they encourage a dialogue in which conventional values are questioned in favor of a living theater, which Pistoletto hopes will result in a common ground of thought and activity. The shared attention his artworks demand turn on the notion of a democratized theater, one that involves the audience both physically and metaphysically. Even Pistoletto's sculptures, known as Minus Objects, exist as freestanding events in which the viewer participates as an active force. The relations between artist and audience are essentially syncretic and mutually supportive, in ways that contrast with Minimalism, the American sculptural movement that was taking place at the same time in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, unlike Minimalism, whose forbidding pieces are looking more and more like a homage to rather than a critique of industrial monumentality, Arte Povera's politics encompass a democratic view of art, one that would embrace the public.

This embrace must be regarded as a leap of faith as well as a political act. Pistoletto has not deliberately politicized his art, although the mirror paintings document the free will of those seen on their surface, and the productions of Lo Zoo took theater into the streets. Instead, he seeks a socially aware discussion of art's ability to reify emotion, thought, and—just as important—the physical selves of his public. This, then, is an inspired improvisation, a theater for everyone. One of his most interesting works is *Quadro da pranza (Lunch Painting)*, done in 1965, which consists of a skeletal wooden frame almost a foot and a half wide, in which simple right-angled seats and a table, made of the same wood, form the image in its entirety. The frame extends just far enough from

the wall to allow actual participants to have lunch while sitting on the seats. The work is not only a magical case of viewer interaction, it also possesses a remarkable graphic virtuosity, and we remember that, at the age of twenty in 1953, Pistoletto enrolled in an advanced school of advertising in Turin. But beyond the sheer ingenuity of the piece, it is also a call to action, if only to so simple a recreation as eating lunch. We know that the public nature of Pistoletto's work argues for an awareness of the public nature of life; we are responsible, as in the mirror paintings, for the consequences of our events, composed as they are of private meaning and, hopefully, public virtue.

While it is true that the Arte Povera movement reacted against corporate values and used materials of humble origins, it also sought a far-reaching transformation of art itself. Yet its position was just as synthetic as it was confrontational, in the sense that it posited art activity as the next best thing—that is, as what would follow an inherently open position in regard to culture. I do not mean to minimize the importance of political opposition in Arte Povera, whose very name projects a democratic rather than elitist understanding of art. Italy in 1968 and 1969 was a volatile place, part of a concerted, nearly global effort to realize a world of greater equality. Theater was one way of transforming social roles by erasing difference, with the sharp awareness that history, both as esthetic form and political reality, projects from the past into the present. One of the most striking works by Pistoletto is the 1965-66 *Scultura linea (Wooden Sculpture)*, in which an antique, heavily abraded wooden sculpture of a woman has been placed into an open, orange Plexiglas container, which rises to the sculpture's middle point. Here the plastic orange encircling the work acts as a scrim through which we see the wooden piece from a decidedly contemporary point of view.

Yet the Plexiglas container encompasses only the lower half of the sculpture, which is also allowed a meaningfulness in a *historical* sense. The object is found, but its housing is constructed from a highly contemporary material. The contrast is just and also essentially descriptive—Pistoletto creates a juxtaposition of materials to relate a juxtaposition of kinds of mind. The young woman is literally worn down by time, while the orange Plexiglas shows no signs of wear. As a result, the two exist in a public dialogue about the meaningfulness of art, during a time when historical process itself was being challenged by a radicalization of art's motivation. The title of the show at the Philadelphia Museum (which will travel to the Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo in Rome [March 3-June 26, 2011]), was "Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956-1974"; the subtitle implies an extension, a greater expansiveness, in which everyone is invited as a participant/observer within the construct of art as theater. *Scultura linea* has been damaged by the centuries, yet it remains capable of engaging us. In light of its effects, we understand that there is no reason why art of the moment should give up the effort to forge awareness of one's position as a viewer, which holds values that are as impressive, and also as expressive, as the historical figure surrounded by orange plastic.

Mirror Paintings

If we return to the analogy of the theater, we can see that Pistoletto's mirror paintings clearly provide us with an instantaneous dialogue, positing visual inventiveness in the form of reflection. By including the audience in the painting, Pistoletto shows us how we participate in both an actual and an imagined reality, with the latter acting as a support but also a critique of real life. The mirror paintings give access to a measured participation, whereby the viewer commands part of the reality of the artwork. Indeed, we move from the one to the many, just as the show's title says, because *anyone* can complete the painting. Democracy of a radical kind becomes available in Pistoletto's art, which closes the gap between artist and community. This suggests that the artist has been interested in democratic values from the start, intending to widen the audience for his paintings, sculptures, and actions. Like the other *Poveristi*, Pistoletto finds truth in an informality that emphasizes the moment, and its communication, over a sense of formal completion. But I do not mean to say that Pistoletto is primarily a process artist—his sense of the object as a discrete thing is very strong and highly imaginative. It is the contrasting dialogue between his art's needs and his perceived needs of the audience that makes his art so unforgettable.

It was in 1961 that Pistoletto found himself looking at a heavily varnished background of an unfinished painting, which reflected his image back to himself. He then understood that he could copy his likeness not by looking into a mirror but by gazing at himself directly in the canvas. This led to the exciting event of 1962: the creation of unprecedented, wonderfully original mirror paintings, in which the artist would paint from photos of people onto tissue paper attached to a highly polished, large, vertically aligned rectangle of polished stainless steel; later paintings incorporated the photographic images as silkscreens. The steel background inevitably reflects its surroundings, in and out of which actual people move. In the mirror paintings generally, the visitor's activities generated an unpredictable theater whose events were best seen and understood by those responsible for them. A 1963 self-portrait (Pistoletto began his career with a series of self-portraits) on polished stainless steel shows the artist squatting, wearing a blue shirt, brown pants, and brown shoes in a 120-cm-square format. Posing on the left side of the painting, Pistoletto has kept the rest of the steel untouched, lacking other figures so that it would be easy for a viewer to find himself in its surface. Thus, one becomes complicit with the overall composition; in this work, one takes on a physical (if imaginary) relationship with the artist himself.

So it happens that Pistoletto's audience in the mirror paintings are never innocent bystanders—they are needed to complete the work of art. This is a kind of poor theater, in which presence fulfills the implicit wish of the artist to have his image seen and the social implications of its partial completion realized. In a way, the drama is ironic; we understand from the start that an actual interaction between the painted-tissue image and the viewer is impossible. Even so, it is important to recognize that self-awareness may be generated by the passerby, who, on seeing himself in the mirrored surface, is challenged to record the details of the scene. Here the drama exists in two parts: first, there is the drama of finding oneself part of an artwork; and second, there is the drama of the resultant awareness that yes, the image is found both in the reality of the artist and that of

the viewer's own imagination. So the mirror painting acts as a theater partially devised by its audience, and as a challenge to the participant to acknowledge the actuality and unspoken responsibility of his presence. The image is transformed into a dramatic freedom, giving its audience the power to remain on or leave the stage.

Why would Pistoletto make art of this kind? For one, it shifts responsibility onto his viewers, who are *active* participants in the painting—in a radically democratic world, everyone is responsible for change. Pistoletto's work does not come off as politically charged, even when one sees the letters "NAM," part of the spelling for Vietnam, on a banner of a protest image used in a mirror painting (*Vietnam* [1965]). The artist tends to record facts rather than change them, even when he edits the photos responsible for his figures, leaving some people in and taking some people out as his vision demands. Other images insist on participatory awareness, as happens in *Cage* (1973), a very large silkscreen on polished stainless steel, in which a man in blue sweeps an area behind bars. The conundrum facing Pistoletto's audience is simple but finally unresolvable: are we on the inside or the outside of captivity? Here the metaphor becomes literal, but it is not weakened by Pistoletto's doing so. In the final analysis, his politics are not so much topical as existential, referring back to the freedom he allows himself—and his viewers—in his art. This freedom may be likened to the ability to make choices in actual life—Pistoletto, like many good, exploratory contemporary artists, is at pains to bridge the gap between art and life, and one way of doing that is through the participation of his spectators.

But it isn't so much that Pistoletto has turned his back on the past; he wants, I think, to bring it up to date. In *Deposizione* (Deposition) (1973), a large, vertically aligned sheet of stainless steel stands with the image of a young woman and young man silkscreened on the lower left. Wearing a ribbed shirt and short dress, she is trying to lift the man, who is clothed in blue jeans. Of course, as the painting's title and image make known, the reference clearly is that of Christ's deposition after his death on the cross. Pistoletto, who is in some ways a more conservative artist than one might at first imagine—in regard to his training as a painter, he studied the foundation of art with his father, a painter who didn't trust art schools to educate his son. In *Deposizione*, he contemporizes an actual set theme. We become the actual audience of a spurious Christ, who wears modern clothing but affects us for historical reasons. In this case it becomes clear that Pistoletto isn't at war with the past for political reasons; instead, he is seeking a correlative current with historical images. It can be argued that the mirror paintings are somewhat passive, made complete only by the activities of those who pass by. But that is to miss his very public, political point—namely, that the consequences of our behavior belong not only to the individual but also to the social realm, where one affects others as well as oneself. In the interaction with the many, the one begins to disappear.

Minus Objects

Pistoletto's *Oggetti in meno* (Minus Objects) were begun in 1965, after he gave up working on paintings alone (he has continued making the mirror paintings to this day).

Pistoletto showed the sculptures in his studio in 1965-66; a first impression would most likely include the recognition that each work has little formal relation to the other. It is as if a group show had taken place instead of the exhibition of a single artist. In a sense the sculptures develop, as a group, the notion of radical difference, moving away from the artist's overarching identity toward a state of being best characterized as idiosyncratic variety. The striking individuality of the works suggests a negative, or minus, persona—someone who has let the work speak for itself, on its own terms (there is as well Pistoletto's presentation of himself as a Minus Man, which will be discussed below). In a way, these objects, which include a large globe of newspapers encircled by a spheric cage, a cement sarcophagus, and a cube of six mirrors turned inward and tied with spring, act as props for a theater as yet unrealized. Pistoletto has managed to project his absence—not his presence—into objects whose reason for being is oddly but powerfully self-contained. The self-sufficient identity of the Minus Objects embraces variously expressed interactions, which emphasize the sculpture's identity beyond that of Pistoletto's; so a lost sense of authorship obtains. But such a loss does not harm the objects' aura, which occasions the display of autonomy in response to social convention.

As discrete objects, the works are marvelously sculptural (*Scultura lignea*, mentioned above, is part of the Minus Objects array). They invent possibilities for dialogue, such as the sculpture *Struttura per perlare in piedi* (Structure for Talking while Standing) (1965-66), which consists of welded and painted iron pipe. It serves as a support on which people in discussion could easily lean; it appears that the artist is intending some sort of meeting, some gathering of people (the pipe creates a small stage as well as a brace). The marvelous painting, or low relief, called *Mica* (1965-66), consists of mica coating a square canvas. Interestingly, there is nothing that joins the works, either formally or thematically. One might see them, and the other Minus Objects, as one-off solutions to problems that do not demand a coherent style. In fact, the diversity facing us with regard to such work shrugs off the notion of a single attribution in favor of a more existentially conceived understanding of art.

Sculpture may be the most profound of media because it suffices unto itself; it is not dependent on a *fictional* three-dimensional space—as so much of painting has been. Pistoletto's accomplishment, which can be viewed as virtuosic to the point of greatness, has been to construct a community of individual works whose vast differences from each other argues against the one—the artist himself—in favor of the many—the objects themselves, but also the audience interacting with his art. Pistoletto does not consciously efface himself or his public responsibility toward his creations; rather, his objects assume a formal and thematic self-sufficiency that speaks to all manner of social interaction. *Mappamondo* (Globe) (1966-68) consists of a ball of newspapers surrounded by an open-wire grid; it was made in conjunction with two actions taken by Lo Zoo, Pistoletto's improvisatory troop, in the streets of Turin in December 1967 and January 1968. The group rolled the ball on the street and drove it around in a car; the piece was called *Scultura da passeggio* (Walking Sculpture). Certainly, the two events partake of the absurd, which is perhaps the only condition with which Pistoletto's Minus Objects comply.

It is instructive, then, to think about Pistoletto's work as an ongoing performance in search of an audience that would do justice to its nonhierarchical, improvisatory, and, ultimately, political motivations. The absurd runs through Pistoletto's art; it is a thread linking the various works together. The artist himself is anxious not to commit himself to the leftist, street-fighting spirit of the time—but that does not mean he stands outside the pale of history during the period this exhibition covers. In late 1969, for example, Pistoletto created *L'Uomo Nero*, translated into English as *The Minus Man*; one of the artifacts of this creation is *Valigia dell'Uomo Nero* (Suitcase of the Minus Man) (1969), which consists of a suitcase with chalked words written upon it. The valise emphasizes portability—it is a metaphor for improvised travel as well as a kind of home for the Minus Man. The Minus Man functions as an alter ego of Pistoletto; it points out, in humorous fashion, the vulnerability of someone whose existence is to be doubted. But if the objects and actions begin with absurdity, they also embrace its social consciousness; the art points to performance as emptiness, or the loss of explicable meaning. Hence the appearance of improvisatory theater, which manifests itself in the quotidian as an intervention of a particularly social sort.

We cannot say with certainty that Pistoletto turned his back on the politics of his time. Even so he tended to transform the political into a buffoon's theatre, where the unreasonable takes over the notion of social activism. A portable street barrier, made in 1968, is converted into absurdity by Pistoletto's covering individual bricks with rags: titled *Muretto di Stracci* (Street Wall of Rags), the work presents itself both as a relic of political activism and an object belonging to Arte Povera materials. In this piece, topical awareness shares the stage with the simple but striking decision to clothe the bricks with cloth. The piece is in fact impoverished in a physical sense, but nonetheless effective. In general, the works created with rags manage to connote the masses and poverty in general, in ways that are startlingly imaginative.

Perhaps Pistoletto's greatest sculpture is *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags), a 1967 work in which Pistoletto takes a marble statue of a nude Venus and poses her so that she faces a mound of colorful rags taller than she is. It is hard not to see this piece as a confrontation between the privileges of beauty and the mute demands of the lower classes. Pistoletto, who rejects such privilege, turns to an art whose very materials question the possibility of a continuing aristocracy of taste. His audience understands his Venus as being overwhelmed by refuse—bits of cloth that possess no meaning on their own but communicate an unspoken need when gathered into a pile. The Venus belongs to the past, while the rags belong to the future; the point of their intersection represents the meeting of both in the present moment. This meeting is political, but it is also an expression of the absurd, in the sense that the rags remain symbols of need, untouched by the vision of historical beauty which they embrace.

For this writer the other remarkable image is the 1965 sculpture named *Rosa bruciata* (Burnt Rose). Its large size (140 x 140 x 100 centimeters) makes it absurd, although the transformation of its materials—corrugated cardboard painted red with spray paint—into an object of unseemly beauty is memorable in the extreme. Transformation of what's at hand lies at the center of the Arte Povera aesthetic, and Pistoletto's unusual gift

for reorganizing humble materials into statements of graphic power and social awareness becomes powerfully available for his audience. His spectators may be amused by the incongruity of his images, even though the rags strikingly record the quotidian for display. Pistoletto's theater relies on improvisation and communal values, and, similarly, his sculptures use the materials of the moment to present a radical innocence. It becomes clear that his actions and materials are based on a present tense that lacks both past and future. The reliance on the moment supports Pistoletto's unspoken critique of the social conventions of the time, which he undermines by refusing to take part either in the idolatry of the past or in the adoration of the future. The burnt rose of his imagination shows us that something beautiful can indeed be forged by contingency of the many rather than by the artist alone. Pistoletto's achievement is to have recognized that the quotidian, in the form of interactive paintings, singular sculptures, and street performances, carries with it an awareness of social possibilities that begin with the absurd but end in a poor theater's resistance to convention. His art takes place on a stage where the script ends not with a whimper but with a bang.