

## SLEEK

# Michelangelo Pistoletto: 'I think Arte Povera is the last movement'

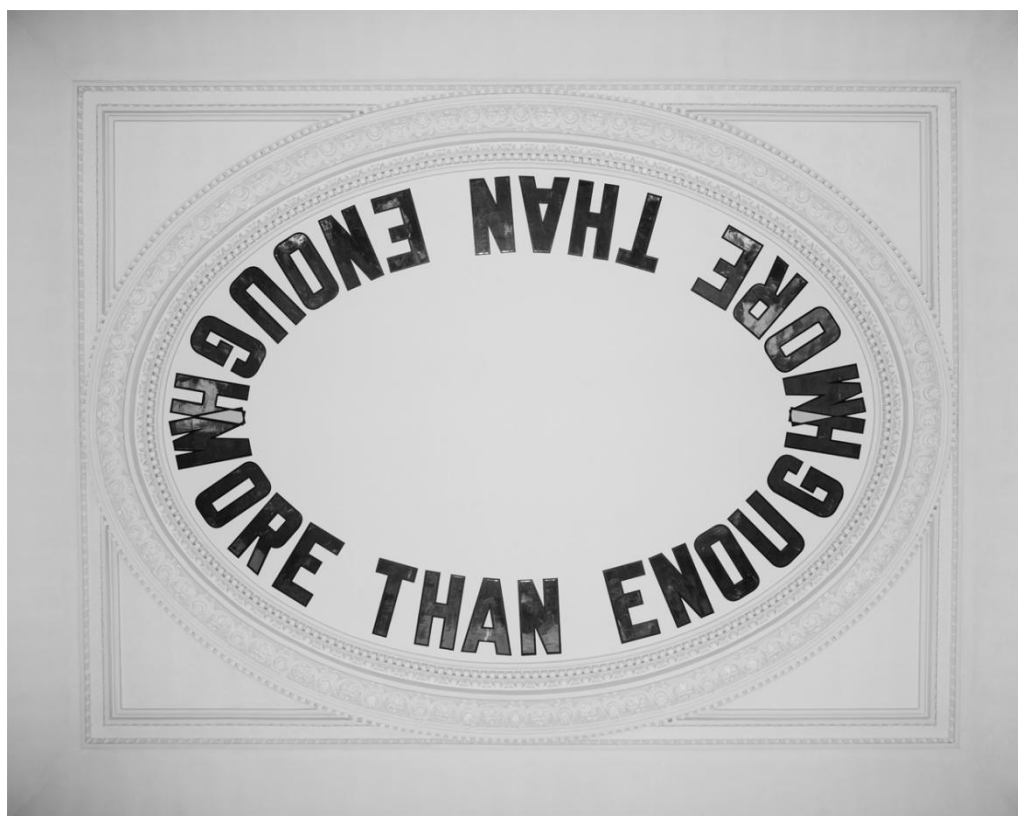


Michelangelo Pistoletto by Dan Wilton and Does God Exist? Yes, I do, 1978 -2016, Third State Room, 2016

Blenheim Palace's cafe is the last place you'd expect to find the legendary Michelangelo Pistoletto, yet here he is, drinking a glass of red wine. Pistoletto is the king of Arte Povera (meaning the prosaic of the earth), the movement that established conceptual art as the *modus operandi*.

Along with artists like Giuseppe Penone, Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz, Pistoletto's work drew on the everyday in a poetic rather than a pop way. His influence can be seen in the conceptual pick and choose of artists like Ryan Gander or Alicja Kwade, the intense materiality of Anish Kapoor or the use of found objects by artists such as Piotr Lakomy and Michael Dean. It is no surprise Pistoletto is not overwhelmed by Blenheim's aristocratic setting. "I made a show in the Louvre in 2013 and there is the history of humanity," he explains. "Here the history is much shorter." In his long career, Pistoletto has exhibited at hugely respected international institutions, from The Guggenheim and Tate Modern to multiple iterations of documenta. He is one of the big guns of contemporary art – ever more in demand even in his eighties.





and Lawrence Weiner MORE THAN ENOUGH, 2015 From Lawrence Weiner: Within a Realm of Distance at Blenheim Palace, 2015, ceiling of the Long Library, 2016

He was born during the rise of fascism in Italy in 1933, to a traditional painter and antique restorer father, and discovered contemporary art while training to enter advertising. His urge for simplicity and materials grounded in life echoed the political and cultural landscape in Italy after World War II, which balanced leftwing politics and neorealism.

## **“THE MIRROR REFLECTS HISTORY, BUT AT THE SAME TIME CREATES A KIND OF FRICTION THAT OPENS THE FUTURE”**

Pistoletto's work combines a resistance to consumerism with a new take on media and a dose of performance. Meaning and media became vital, and remain so for Pistoletto today. “You feel the language of the material itself. You need that material to express yourself. For me, there is no difference between gold and rags. They are both useful. Marble and textile. The simplicity of the materials is also very important. We want to talk about simple things, not only about powerful complexity.”

Pistoletto's signature material is the mirror. In 1962, he developed a technique for fixing photographic images to mirrored surfaces that transformed the concept of portraiture and the viewer. His choice of photographic imagery, as demonstrated by the 32 works on display at Blenheim, has changed over time from polaroids to digital images and from people in his studio to images of kitchen cupboards or prison cell bars. You can never look at the mirror and see the same thing twice.



Sedia, 1974 Long Library, 2016

Time is a constant here. "The mirror reflects history, but at the same time creates a kind of friction that opens the future." The hypnotic selfie attraction of the mirror draws the viewer into more serious considerations. They look at layers of the past – the reflected room, the ageing photographic image – and themselves inserted alongside it. The viewer in a sense becomes the medium. Pistoletto feels that the mirror pieces on show at Blenheim can open new audiences up to the possibilities of art. "I think that many people don't understand what's going on. They just hear the voice of a tour guide, and remember something in the past, something that they studied. It's enough that the guide says, 'This is a work, and you are inside. The mirror can be a work of art!'"

Pistoletto's early Arte Povera works still feel powerful. The Blenheim show opens with the 1967 work "Venus of the Rags", in which a white marble copy of the goddess stands in front of a giant pile of disused clothes. In the context of migration and consumer excess today, the piece feels increasingly relevant. It is unusual to meet an artist who still strongly believes in the possibility of innovation, in art and in life. "We can create a new culture. We can create a new economy. We can create something else."

**"FOR ME, THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN  
GOLD AND RAGS"**





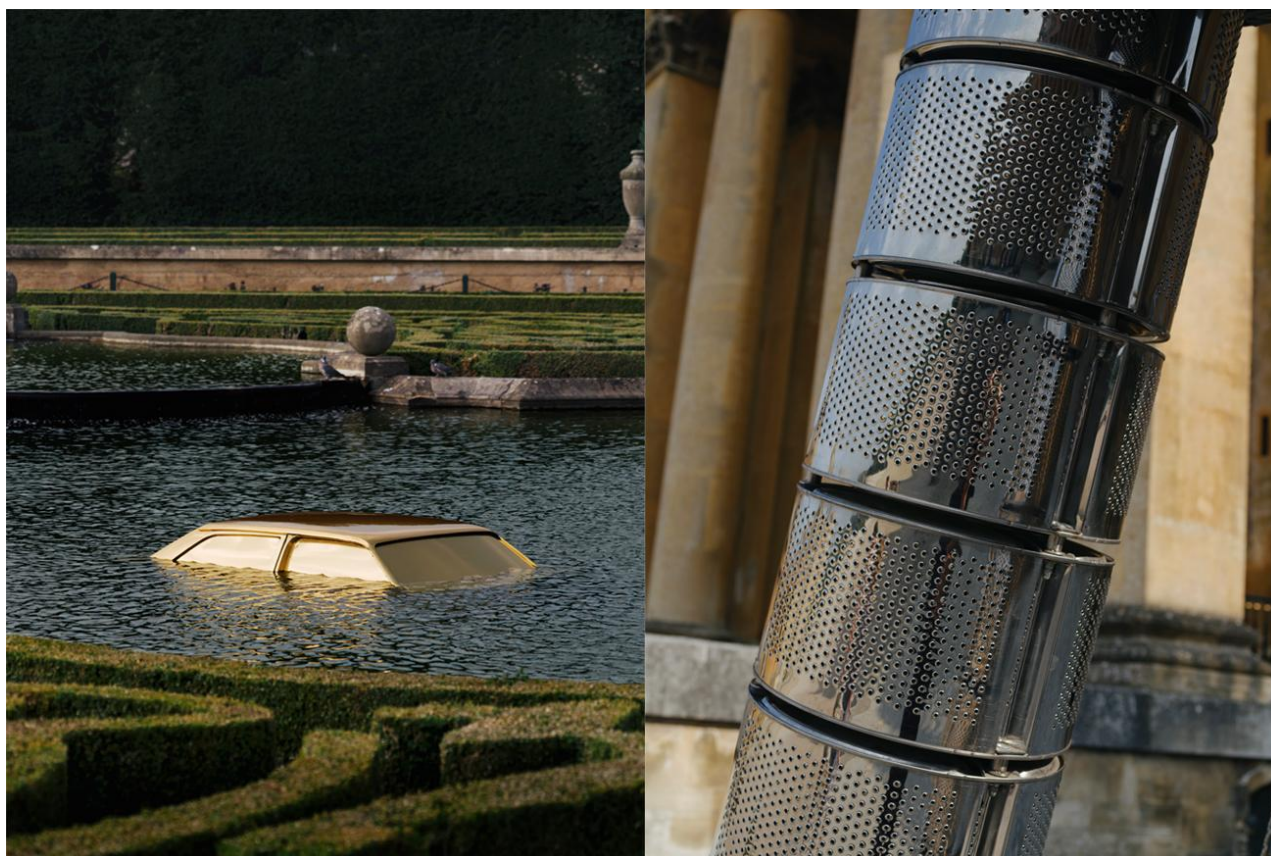
Miraggio, 2016, Upper Water Terraces, 2016

He has been exploring his fascination with these different areas of life in the Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, which he founded in 1998 in a converted wool mill in Biella, Piedmont. Here, research residencies explore different sectors of social engagement, including ecology, politics, labour and spirituality. There is a utopian vibe to their projects, which evolve into talks, performances and artworks. "Utopia is always necessary. Utopia always means abandoning a situation and looking for another," Pistoletto points out.

His non-profit foundation "transforms theory into activity, to find really where it is possible to combine the positive and the negative and create a new energy – not only physical energy but mental energy. As an artist I have to take responsibility for creating a possibility of looking farther than the present." For Pistoletto, the overconsumption and production in the past fifty years is leading us into dark waters. "In two years, ten years perhaps, the entire world will be in a crisis – a real disaster. People will kill each other. It is necessary to organise life in a way that everybody can add spirit to participating in human survival."

Despite this focus on the weight of the world, there is also a strong vein of humour in Pistoletto's work. The work "Miraggio" (2016) consists of a submerged gold car in a fountain in Blenheim's grounds – so ridiculous and incongruous it looks like someone got drunk and went the wrong way. A large text piece in one room, amidst the 18th century furniture and regal portraiture, reads "Does God Exist? Yes I Do!" (1978-2016). Pistoletto is drawn to the dynamism of the joke and how it breaks through the viewer-object connection. "Humour is the real system of making relationships very quickly. Analysis is not necessary, even boring." His work sidesteps a political stance. "I have nothing against the capitalist system, but also I have nothing against communism. I think that there was a mistake on both sides!" he laughs.





Miraggio, 2016, Upper Water Terraces, 2016

For an artist who has made work questioning our relationship to consumption, his economic success is ironic, but Pistoletto carries it well. "For me, the market is just something that is necessary." Money, therefore, is a useful enabler for Pistoletto to focus on higher things. An element of the spiritual is something that comes up often in his work. "Modern art is spiritual by and in itself, because it opens the mind to all you can imagine. The imagination begins when you recognise that an image is representing reality," he says. This is an artist not afraid to address our relationship to every aspect in life. He presents an ambitious definition of the artist as philosopher and activist, academic and commentator, provocateur and pioneer. The God comparison in his text work on display is not entirely tongue-in-cheek. "I like to make propositions. Paradise is a proposition."

**"WE CAN CREATE A NEW CULTURE. WE CAN  
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It is hard to imagine something as conversation changing as Arte Povera emerging today. "I think Arte Povera is the last movement," Pistoletto expounds. "It is the synthesis of all that went on in the 20th century. The concentration of all the concepts and possibilities to consider the world and really find the system of balance." Pistoletto, nonetheless, still provides a great example of an artist constantly striving to make art's place in the world matter.