

# Michelangelo Pistoletto: the artist with a smashing way to save the world

Pistoletto shook up the 60s with his *arte povera* revolution. What's the legendary mirror-smasher doing now? Designing houses made of rice at his eco HQ

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The Guardian, Wednesday 28 May 2014



Michelangelo Pistoletto performs one of his mirror-smashing works in Paris. Photograph: Galleria Continua

It's a Thursday lunchtime and Michelangelo Pistoletto's cafe is buzzing. All around me, people are chatting, eating and laughing as they sit at wooden tables in this stylishly stripped-back space. Pistoletto, one of the most celebrated artists in Europe, has joined me for antipasti, along with his wife Maria and, for some reason, their very entertaining dentist, who is telling me how he got a free delivery of berries yesterday after helping an old man who had got lost in the street.

Pistoletto, a visionary figure who believes artists have a mission to change the world, jokes that our antipasti are tantamount to *arte povera* food – their simple and honest ingredients reflecting the philosophies of the revolutionary artistic and social movement he launched way back in the 1960s. I tuck into my roasted carrots, stuffed courgettes and octopus, washing it all down with a good Piedmont wine. If this is utopianism, bring me more. And look! Here comes the panna cotta.

The cafe is part of Pistoletto's Cittadellarte foundation, housed in a converted 19th-century mill in the Piedmont city of Biella in northern Italy. Last year, this giant of the avant-garde, now in his 80s, had a one-man show at the Louvre pyramid; and this weekend a homage to Pistoletto will take place in Britain, when his piece *Ten Less One* closes the London Contemporary Music festival.

Like so much of his work, it involves mirrors: in this case, they're being smashed. Pistoletto sees the destruction of a mirror as a way of pointing up the interconnectedness of the world. "Each shard still has the same reflecting quality as the whole mirror," he says. "So all mirrors are connected, smashed or intact, just as all humans share the same basic DNA. I see society as a kind of broken mirror."

Joking aside, it is misleading to translate "arte povera" – which Pistoletto launched with the critic Germano Celant and various other artists in 1967 – as "poor art". It's much more accurate to render it as "plain art". As Pistoletto says: "Povera does not mean without money in your pocket. It means the essential energy of art." Like the room I am sitting in, it's about things being stripped back to reveal their essence.

I bite into my frittata, hoping to taste some more of the arte povera ethos. But it's not just food that Pistoletto is rethinking at his sprawling Cittadellarte complex on the banks of the Cervo, the Alpine river that roars through the valley where Italy's industrial revolution started 200 years ago. Biella is nicknamed "the Manchester of Italy" – although, with its empty stone factories set against steep hills, it looks more like a Yorkshire mill town. Here, Pistoletto's team work with designers, students, schools and businesses to develop sustainable products and ideas. Their brief? To save the world.

There's a fashion lab that develops sustainable clothes; they work with local farmers to grow sustainable crops; and they currently have an exhibition in which artists reveal the global networks hidden behind popular Italian commodities such as coffee and wine. But Pistoletto is especially proud of their architecture: their radical furniture and buildings, most notably a house built of bales of straw. "Straw is warm in the winter and cool in the summer," he explains.

Soon, we're in his black Mercedes, heading for Milan and his prototype house made of rice straw. Rice is one of northern Italy's staple crops and the drive takes us past waterlogged rice fields that reflect passing clouds. Pistoletto talks enthusiastically throughout, frequently taking both hands off the wheel of his car, which seems to drive itself. "Rice," he says as we reach our destination, "can be used for eating and building. The skin of the rice, the husk, can be used to make small objects. So with rice, you have food, houses *and* objects for houses." He hands me a bowl to examine; it turns out it is made of rice husks.

Born in Biella in 1933, Pistoletto grew up under fascism. "You had to believe – in God and in Mussolini. I felt there was a terrible contradiction in believing in a system producing hate, producing massacres. After the war, Italy saw the rise of both capitalism and communism. You had to believe in one or the other. Discovering modern art was, for me, an illumination. Now I could think rather than believe."

After 1945, Italian culture embraced realism. It was as if all the lies of the Mussolini age could be purged only by a harsh blast of pure truth. In cinema, this led to the likes of Rome, Open City and The Earth Trembles (La Terra Trema). Meanwhile, the 17th-century realist painter Caravaggio was rediscovered – and a young artist called Michelangelo Pistoletto started to appropriate mirrors, painting directly on to their surfaces. "Everything in my work has come from the mirror," he says, "and the idea that it reflects society and reality."

At Cittadellarte, they still have one of the paintings that first set him on this path: a self-portrait in which he depicts himself against a shiny black background. Pistoletto was struck by its ever-changing reflections. "To make a self-portrait, the artist always needed a mirror. I was looking at my identity: who I am, what I am doing. I needed the mirror to see myself and then realised, little by little, that the mirror itself was what I was looking for."

When we move to his office, a frescoed room that is part of the grand architecture of this 1872 factory, I can see the houses and the hill behind me reflected in a mirror painting. Like all of the mirror works Pistoletto has made since the early 1960s, it consists of a highly polished metal sheet onto which an

image has been added, in this case a hangman's noose. While the noose stays as it is, fixed within the frame, the world moves and changes in the rest of the surface, as time passes and light varies. "What we see in the mirror cannot be falsified," he says.

Walking among such works, on a floor devoted to his art, is like being confronted with an almost unbearable reality. I feel acutely self-conscious and challenged, as my reflected self briefly passes through images of a car, a woman with a camera, and a crowd of people. "There is no limit to the reflection of the mirror," he says. "We have this possibility to exist in the mirror, to appear and to disappear. And so we see that our existence is a very limited period of time. Mirrors are not the expression of my will or my feelings, but a phenomenological effect."

Decades before interactive art became the buzzword it is today, Pistoletto's mirrors were putting the spectator into the work. And they do this in a way that puts you on trial. You feel judged. Today, says Pistoletto, we see something ugly when we look in the mirror: the world that looks back at us is heading for environmental catastrophe. "It is good to denounce such things," he says. "But denunciation is not enough. You have to propose solutions. Otherwise you can fight, but you can't change anything."

His words echo the thinking behind *arte povera* – and he believes the movement still has something to teach our overconsuming planet today. "We can put the words 'povera' and 'sustainability' together," he says. What his cafe sells – made from fresh local ingredients – is not just nice to eat, but part of his vision of sustainability that has its roots in Italy's greatest contemporary art movement. For what Pistoletto learned when he looked in the mirror is that art and life are one. "The material for making art is not just canvas, wood or marble – but society itself."

• *Pistoletto's Ten Less One is at Second Home, Britannia House, London E1, on 1 June as part of the London contemporary music festival*